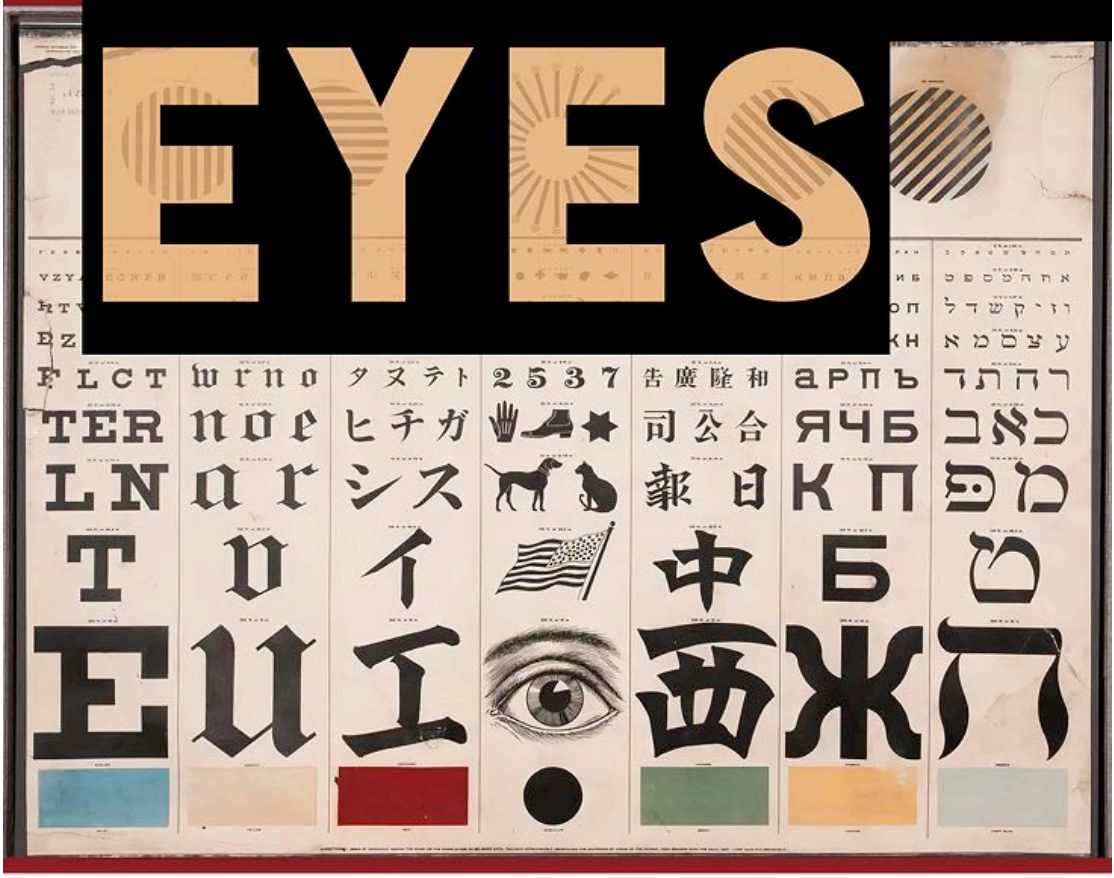
FINITE EYES



essays on education & access

Matthew Cheney

Finite Eyes

Finite Eyes

essays on education and access

by Matthew Cheney

As much of noon, as I could take–
Between my finite eyes–

Emily Dickinson

The Mumpsimus Press
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for the CoLab:
Martha Burtis
Shannon Ford
Elm Forge

and the one who started it all,
Robin DeRosa

and in memory of our student and colleague
River Gogh Moon,
who embodied everything good that education stands for,
and who was taken from this world far too soon—
but not without leaving an indelible mark of beauty.

how did it go so fast
you'll say as we are looking back
and then we'll understand
we held gold dust
in our hands
—Tori Amos

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Preface

Almost all of the essays in this book originally appeared on a blog titled *Finite Eyes*, which existed from June 2018 to September 2024. Having decided to corral as much of my writing as possible on my personal website (matthewcheney.net), I closed the finiteeyes.net domain once I had copied all the posts over.

The title came from Emily Dickinson's poem "Before I got my eye put out—", a strange and lovely lyric about vision (in every sense). The poem imagines what is transcendent and then settles on what is more ordinary, a view from a window rather than an all-seeing view from the sky. These writings are very much a view from my window.

I began the blog shortly after finishing my PhD and getting what at the time was expected to be a one-year job as a sabbatical replacement for my friend Robin DeRosa in the Interdisciplinary Studies program at Plymouth State University, a regional public university in my hometown, and a school where both my mother and stepmother had spent their careers as members of the staff. I intended *Finite Eyes* to be a tool for low-stakes writing about issues of education, interdisciplinarity, and elements of Open Education. I knew nothing about Open Education until Robin introduced me to it, but I did know a lot about many of the ideas it was based on such as open source software, open access publishing, and critical pedagogy. (Indeed, critical pedagogy had been a significant component in my PhD dissertation via the writings of Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and bell hooks.) With *Finite Eyes*, I hoped to explore these ideas and see how they might fit my own sense of the world.

This book contains a significant majority of the work I put on the blog. I have left out only items that did not have much substance to them or that were primarily links to other websites. This is not a collection of the posts I think are most effective or most important — that would be a much shorter book! That was, though, my original intention. However, as I worked my way through these writings, I realized that they are stronger together than separately, because each is best considered as a node in a process of thinking. Ideas glimpsed in one essay are returned to in another; concepts that seem finished on one page reveal new possibilities many pages later.

One goal of this book is to show how certain ideas changed over time, due to my own continued thought or, at least as often, due to changes in the world. These essays were begun during Donald Trump's first term as President of the United States of America, they were continued through the COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter protests of the summer of 2020, and the election of Joe Biden — and now I write at the end of the first year of Trump's second term, a time of absolute devastation in American higher education. I expect it will be a generation or longer before this country recovers, if it ever does, from the destruction brought to it by Trump and his acolytes.

The years during which these essays were written were extremely volatile socially, politically, and in the realm of education. Because for years now it has felt like change keeps happening at terrible speed, it is important to collect the eyewitness reports of changes happening. We need the firsthand accounts, we need to know how people thought during times of struggle, uncertainty, terror. It is too easy to forget. We have seen over and over how fascism forms its own story, one closer to myth than reality, and all we have to combat it is what we see, hear, know, and experience ourselves. Mine is a small and minor perspective on huge and major events, but I hope this book might offer a tiny contribution to a larger perspective — a free and truthful perspective for an era of untruth and unfreedom.

Everything on *Finite Eyes* was written quickly, none of it seen by anybody other than myself before publication. These

chapters, then, record moments. The writing is more ragged and messy than it would be in other circumstances. Some of that raggedness and messiness I have smoothed over with editing, but most of it I have kept, because I'm still a literary historian at heart, and something of a historical materialist, so I strongly believe that the conditions of a work's writing are important to its aesthetic and its meaning.

Originally, I planned that the chapters would appear in chronological order, but in putting the book together, it seemed important to place essays together that develop similar ideas. There is no easy way to do this, because many of the essays cover a variety of topics, so I have arranged the essays into six loosely-connected groups, and within the groups I have placed them chronologically unless there was a good reason to violate chronology. The date of first publication appears at the end of each chapter and the essays are listed in chronological order in the publication history at the end of the book.

Many of the essays are slightly edited from their first appearance. The editing is entirely for the sake of clarity and concision; if I have more information or a different perspective now, I have added an afterword to the essay. Citations are generally based on the guidelines of the *Chicago Manual of Style*, but they are less consistent in their structure than the *CMoS* recommends, because it felt right for a book of blog posts to be loose and occasionally weird in its citations, following gut instinct for what information the reader might need more than any strict rules. The bibliography at the end of the book provides information not only (not primarily, even) about works referenced in the text, but also for works that have either informed my ideas or works that develop those ideas in other directions.

Because all of these essays were first published online, their original versions were filled with links to other online material. I have included those links in footnotes if they seemed useful, but have left many out. The online versions of these chapters remain available on my website (matthewcheney.net). A book is something different from a blog, and I wanted to explore that difference in these pages.

One

Five Values

I showed up to work one morning to discover on the front door of the CoLab office a print-out of a slide I'd made for a recent presentation at the Northeast Open Educational Resources Summit. (Robin had put it there.) The slide offers five words that I have come to think of as my bedrock values when working on open pedagogies: *solidarity, cooperation, coalition, refuge, regeneration*. Those words began as an attempt to do for myself what Rajiv Jhangiani did with his "5Rs for Open Pedagogy": to create a set of values for this work.[1] As Rajiv says in that post, his 5Rs are not necessarily everybody's else's, because any such values are "personal, subjective, and contextual."

The word *values* is a little difficult for me to embrace, simply because the word has so often been co-opted by rightwing people to mean something oppressive. (I grew up with U.S. Vice President Dan Quayle attacking the fictional tv character Murphy Brown for not supporting "family values". That ruined the word *values* for me for decades.) But we need values to guide us, and we can't cede talk of values to people who only want to use their idea of values as a weapon against the rest of us.

I settled on these five words by asking myself what it is underneath the Open Education movement that appeals to me. The answer was that ideas of openness appeal to longstanding values I've held for almost all of my life, values embodied by

[1] "5Rs for Open Pedagogy" is available at https://thatpsychprof.com/5rs-for-open-pedagogy/

those five words. I knew I did not want a set of alliterative words, did not want to shoehorn my ideas into a cute system or handy mnemonic. I wanted to know the actual values I hold dearest, and I couldn't do that if I were beholden to alphabetic restrictions. To come up with the words, I thought about the kinds of words I use when describing the sorts of pedagogies I am most passionate about, and I thought about the words that incite a sense of possibility in my own imagination when I hear them. All are words I've been thinking about for a while in various contexts. Bringing them together felt like a logical culmination.

Solidarity

A sense of shared purpose that creates a unity between otherwise separate people and groups. Solidarity implies action, working together, creating community. Within this community of scholars, our purpose is shared. We learn together.

Cooperation

Schools need staff, faculty, and students to feel a sense of cooperation with each other rather than a sense of competition against each other. We help each other, and we are not afraid to ask for help when we need it ourselves. We do not seek to profit off of each other, but to flourish together. We do not work against, we work alongside.

Coalition

When separate, distinct elements work together, they form a coalition. The elements may never meld together and we should not expect them to; rather, we should expect them to stand alongside each other, building on solidarity and cooperation. The elements may, in other contexts, be at odds, but here

they stand together because of at least one important and shared task, situation, goal, or value. Coalitions are usually temporary. They are ways to get things done, and often they require compromise between elements, the recognition of greater goals than individual ones. Your priorities may not be my priorities, but if we have some priorities in common, we can form a coalition and achieve more than we would have on our own. Being open to coalition means being open to difference without seeking to erase the difference or subsume it into yourself. Coalitions can be fraught, frustrating, even painful. But they can also change the world.

Refuge

The world is a dangerous, wounding place, and schools, as institutions in the world, are not free of danger, nor free of wounds. We may arrive banged up and in need of healing before we can really learn what we most need to learn. The process of learning itself may bruise and lacerate. We learn best when we are not still bleeding, not still starving. We learn best when we know what to do with our pain, or when, at least, we know that there is somewhere where our pain will not be used against us. We learn best when we have shelter and some food. What will it take for school to be a refuge for the seekers, the wonderers, the learners?

Regeneration

If something has been emptied out, worn down, or exhausted, it needs regeneration. There is much we need to regrow and much we ought to return to the wild. We must regenerate a sense of education as a public good, of the commons as fertile land, not tragedy. We must regenerate the idea of learning as itself of value. We must seek out practices that regenerate our passions, that regrow our sense of

possibility, that rewild our minds. We must let go of the obsessions that scour the world to dust. We must not embrace growth for its own sake, but rather seek out a wildness that stands against monocultures and monopolies, a wilderness of rhizomes, a wild life of mutual aid and mutual wonder.

I like the concept of regeneration because it helps us move toward a kind of systems thinking, even an ecological thinking. Similarly, I like the concept of *rewilding* as a way to think about the challenges and dangers of progressive, learner-centered education. The kind of teaching I find myself drawn to is a kind that requires the teacher to step back a bit, to let go, to trust the experience, to not be a control freak, to know that a lot of good things will look really messy. Similarly, rewilding asks us to let go of the delusion that we can manicure the environment into perfection. In both situations, we must readjust our idea of what a healthy landscape looks like.

Rewilding is just one part of regeneration, though. I'm equally interested in thinking about regeneration in the terms I offered in the presentation: seeking ways to find what has been lost; to strengthen and heal what has been scoured, scarred, strip-mined, abused; to bring back toward the center of our perception what has been marginalized. Allowing students more freedom and choice within classes feels to me a bit like letting my lawn grow wild. The neighbors might look on, aghast, because no matter how often you tell them that all of the science says monocultural lawns are ecologically awful, we're so conditioned to see a neatly-trimmed lawn as wonderful that vastly more healthy landscapes look, to many eyes, like chaos. Similarly, we're so conditioned to see certain educational practices as good and necessary that one of the greatest challenges for anybody who, for instance, wants to de-emphasize grades is first convincing colleagues, students, and administrators that it won't be the death of all education.

Refuge and regeneration go together for me. We might think of the two concepts as the outcomes of care. By caring for

our work and caring for each other we allow refuge for those who need it and regeneration for what has been scoured, scarred, and strip-mined. How might our work regenerate what deserves to be regenerated, what has been lost or abused or so marginalized as to be nearly beyond perception?

If such questions seem irrelevant to what we are doing here, irrelevant to our work, then I suggest that our conception of our work is too narrow for a world as destructive as our own, and that it is, instead, not the questions but rather our work that might be irrelevant.

We can see the list of five values as linear: we need solidarity for there to be any hope of cooperation; we need cooperation if we're going to be able to build coalitions; we can achieve meaningful refuge by building those coalitions; there can be no regeneration if there is not first some sort of refuge.

We can also see the values as supporting each other in a more complex, recursive, rhizomatic way. Regeneration heals people and structures so they can better cooperate. If we find refuge, we will develop the strength to enter into coalitions. From coalitions, we might discover new ways to cooperate, new paths to solidarity, new types of refuge. No values can exist without context. We are all interdependent — being is interbeing.

Focusing on values helps us escape technocratic and taxonomic trivialities. I got frustrated sometimes at the Open Educational Resources Summit because people would spend lots of time and energy on questions like, "Is this really an Open Educational Resource?" Open is nice, but it's not a quality I care about unless it supports and strengthens other values. Silicon Valley techbros have long been infatuated with the idea of "open" this, that, and another thing, often to the detriment of society and the planet.

I am able, though, thanks to the five values I proposed, to ask questions I do care quite deeply about: Does this tool contribute to, or at least not undermine, solidarity, cooperation,

coalition, refuge, regeneration? Is my behavior congruent with these values? Am I helping to make any progress toward these ideals?

—August 2019

The Value of Uselessness

In 2020, I participated in a professional development program designed by my colleagues Robin DeRosa, Martha Burtis, and Elm Forge, the Cluster Pedagogy Learning Community (CPLC), an initiative supported by a grant from the Davis Family Foundation.[1]

"Cluster Pedagogy" was a concept we came up with to try to bring some concrete practices to vague ideas foisted on our university by a president who had been hired a few years before and who had struggled to do anything but create chaos. We had jettisoned the word "departments" and replaced them with "programs" and "clusters", but good luck getting anybody to define what either of those words meant. It was ultimately all just a bunch of marketing bunk that served to give an alibi to brutal, education-destroying changes based on the idea that the only possible approach is one of austerity.

However, the CPLC was great. My colleagues worked tirelessly to bring some meaning to the idea of "cluster learning", and did so effectively. The CPLC itself built real community on a campus smothered by low morale among staff and faculty. The reward from our administration and board of trustees was more austerity, staff cuts, job losses. But for a few years, we did great work together.

For one CPLC activity titled "A Community of Values", we brainstormed a list of values for our work at a university, how

[1] As of January 2026, an archive still exists at https://colab.plymouthcreate.net/cplc/

we saw ourselves able to live up to those values (or not), and how the university as an institution supported those values (or not). *A value* as a concept was defined via a description adapted from the work of Sidney Simon:

- It's something you chose to value, not something imposed on you.
- You feel good about having the value, and you are willing to tell those you trust about it.
- You act on the value. It's reflected in your life somehow.[2]

My initial response was predictable at first — I value curiosity, experiment, thoughtfulness, etc. — but then another value popped into my mind, and I chuckled, both because I recognized that it really is a value to me and also because it feels utterly ridiculous in the current climate of education and society. That value is *uselessness*.

A great argument could be had about whether anything is actually useless if someone values it. Entire planets of abstruse and abstract philosophy might be visited by exploring the implications of the word *uselessness*. My own use of it is both paradoxical and perverse. I am, paradoxically, asserting that in some contexts uselessness is useful. And I am, perversely, trying to deploy the energy in the negative connotations of the word for positive effect.

First, two examples that come to mind when I think of how and why I value uselessness.

The first is a conversation I had while working on my PhD. It was in a course on professionalization, and the university's

[2] See Simon, Sidney B. *In Search of Values: 31 Strategies for Finding Out What Really Matters Most to You*. Grand Central Publishing, 1993. Also: Simon, Sidney B., Leland W. Howe, and Howard Kirschenbaum. *Values Clarification*. Warner Books, 2009. These are pretty self-helpy and can be superficial, but they're an adequate starting place for thinking about values in a group.

grants officer had come to talk with us about how we, beleaguered humanities scholars all, might get grants for our work. Grant applications, we were told, ought to emphasize how useful our work was, especially to people outside our field. One by one, we were asked how we might explain the usefulness of our work, and then the grants officer offered ideas for what sort of grants we might apply for. I completely failed this activity. "My work," I said, "has no usefulness for anybody outside the field, and very little usefulness for most people inside the field, other than myself, and its usefulness for me is that I find it interesting." We tried some limp brainstorming of ways that the study of esoteric questions of modernist literature might be useful, but ultimately came up with nothing, and the very well-intentioned grants officer quickly moved on to somebody else, someone to whom she might be useful.

My feelings in that moment originated in the fact that I did the PhD for myself. It was an act of absolute selfishness. When I started it, I made a pact with myself that I would pursue the questions that interested me, regardless of whether they would lead to great scholarship, a job, world peace, whatever. The decade before had been excruciatingly difficult, I was at wit's end, and I used the five years of the PhD as a way to save myself. (Not a good plan for most people! Many people experience terrible mental health consequences from doing a PhD! I also had financial resources that allowed me never to go into debt. One of the things that had made the previous years so difficult was my having to sell off my dead father's business. As excruciating as that was — I still occasionally wake up at night from nightmares about it — it left me without financial worries during the time of the degree, so long as I was relatively frugal, and

I was.) Ultimately, my dissertation (and the resulting book)[3] ended up focusing on something like this dynamic that I had wrestled with myself. In hindsight, it seems quite obvious to me why I ended up focusing on how writers in times of political crisis found ways to feel that their work was something other than just fiddling while the world burned around them. Starting from uselessness, I ended up with a topic that was, relatively speaking, useful.

Here's the second thing that comes to mind when I think of the value of uselessness: an old folk song, "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum", which I most love as it is performed by Utah Phillips. I'm particularly amused by the story Phillips tells of a neighbor, a "little retired banker fella" who has

> been known to cannonball his rotundity across the road and stand there and publicly berate me for my sloth and indolence.
>
> "Why don't you get a job?!" he says.
>
> Now, me bein' hip to the Socratic method fires back a question: "Why?"
>
> "Why?!" he says, taken aback. "If you had a job, you could make three, four, five dollars an hour!"
>
> I said, "Why?" (Pursuing the same tack.)
>
> He said, "Well, you make three, four, five dollars an hour, you could have a savings account, save up some of that money."
>
> I said, "Why?"

[3] The dissertation, *Lessoning Fiction: Modernist Crisis and the Pedagogy of Form*, is available Open Access from the University of New Hampshire repository at https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation/2387/. The book developed from it was *Modernist Crisis and the Pedagogy of Form: Woolf, Delany, and Coetzee at the Limits of Fiction*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

> He said, "Well, you save up some of that money, young fella, pretty soon you'd never have to work another day in your life."
>
> I said, "Hell, that's what I'm doin' right now!"

This reminds me of Thoreau's essay "Life Without Principle": "Cold and hunger seem more friendly to my nature than those methods which men have adopted and advise to ward them off. … The ways in which most men get their living, that is, live, are mere make-shifts, and a shirking of the real business of life — chiefly because they do not know, but partly because they do not mean, any better."[4]

The logic that Phillips and Thoreau contradict is the logic that work (or, we might say, usefulness) is inherently better than sloth and indolence (or, we might say, uselessness). This is the logic that says time is an entity that, like money, can be wasted. This is the logic of bean counters and obsessive type-A personalities, and while it may be productive, it is hardly healthy.

The value of *uselessness* for teaching and learning is freedom. It is intimately linked with the more commonly accepted value of curiosity. We may begin by being interested in something for reasons that we don't know. We explore for purposes that are, at least at the beginning, unclear. Will our study be useful or useless? Academia at its best offers the freedom to answer: "It doesn't matter!"

Thus, because the freedom of curiosity requires the freedom of uselessness, uselessness is central to the production of knowledge — in fact, it seems to me that plenty of usefulness starts from uselessness, from daydreaming and experimenting, from embracing serendipity and accidents. And uses may change. You may develop a putty for cleaning wallpaper and

[4] Available in most Thoreau essay collections and online at https://www.thoreau-online.org/life-without-principle.html

soon discover that it's much more popular as a toy for children.[5]

Where, in our learning and teaching, do we make room for daydreaming, experimenting, and repurposing? A great American ("Weird Al" Yankovic) once advocated: "Dare to be stupid!" Perhaps in academia we ought to advocate: "Dare to be useless!"

If you're in academia, though, you probably feel how absurd, even dangerous, such a statement can be. Before COVID-19, higher education was under attack, its administrations often resorting to austerity measures, and the global pandemic has accelerated the crisis beyond anything most of us could have imagined before. Programs are under extraordinary pressures to prove their worth. To prove their usefulness.

I wonder how an institution might embrace uselessness. For us as individual teachers, it feels perilous enough. ("Today, class, we're going to do something useless," is not a sentence most of us want to utter, even if it would perhaps be useful to do so!) But for institutions in a culture that does not see higher education as a public good, and that values immediate gratification over long-term thoughtfulness, and that has long been attached to an idea of overwork as the highest virtue — in such a culture, an institution that celebrates uselessness is unlikely to thrive. Instead, our institutions are rife with spreadsheeted work plans and bullet-pointed learning outcomes, subject to consultants with calculators and boards of business leaders confused by the difference between students and widgets. My inherent anarchistic tendencies buck against these policies and systems — the effluvia of bureaucracy with all its cover-yer-ass busywork and logorrhea of hollow language — but I don't begrudge the systems, really, or have much else to offer except a sigh. The changes necessary to get recognition for uselessness

[5] That would be Play-Doh. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Play-Doh

as a virtue are changes far beyond any individual institution's power.

Yet perhaps what is not available to an institution is available to an individual. Perhaps we as teachers can embrace uselessness, or something like it, in our work in a way no school could as a whole. Perhaps schools will, for the foreseeable future, have to attach themselves to immediate gratifications, but we as faculty might celebrate the joys of Rube Goldberg's machines.

Otherwise, we lose beauty. And pleasure. And delight. These are qualities that often get labeled as useless, and yet they are inherently valuable. If something is beautiful, pleasurable, delightful it is not useless, and it is only an obsession with instrumentality (or puritanical hatred of pleasure) that would make us think so. We too often insist that something be *good for* something else (usually, the making of money) rather than simply good in and of itself. Beauty, pleasure, and delight are intransitive. If something is beautiful, that is justification enough.

And now I think of another classic song sung by Utah Phillips, that beautiful labor anthem from the millworkers of Lawrence, Massachusetts, "Bread and Roses":

Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes.
Hearts can starve as well as bodies.
Give us bread, but give us roses!

—May 2020

The Strength of Kindness

1.

Take a moment, settle yourself, and note your immediate emotional response to these words:

kindness
joy
contemplation
generosity
love
peace

Now think about them in the context of your work. Would your work be better if there were more of these things? Do you feel that they are relevant to what you do every day?

I'll be honest: a deep part of myself resists these words.

On one hand, this makes no sense. Since adolescence, I have described myself as a pacifist (or aspiring pacifist); I don't have many heroes (I'm skeptical of the whole concept) but if I have any they are people who in one way or another devoted themselves to the ideas in those words; I loathe so much that is the opposite of those words: *cruelty, misery, thoughtlessness, hate, war*.

However, even as I know my affinity for those words intellectually, I often must pause when somebody says their goal is to bring kindness, joy, and love into the world, to increase peace, to practice contemplation. I, too, want all these things — and yet when I am tempted to identify my own work with

those words, a demon within me inevitably screams out, "SOFT-BRAINED SUCKER!!!"

This demon is not helpful. But it is illuminating. It illuminates the toxic swampwater we swim in every day, the swampwater of received ideas we are drowning in, the murderous connotations disfiguring the very words we need.

The great weird American poet Jack Spicer's legendary last words were ones true for us all now: *My vocabulary did this to me*.

2.

In recent years, I have occasionally given talks and workshops on creating "cruelty-free syllabi" and, more broadly, thinking about "cruelty-free teaching". I came up with the term on a whim, giving it very little reflection, simply needing a catchy and humorous title for a faculty development workshop at my own institution, a title I hoped might intrigue a few people. It did, and the phrase took off in a way I could never have predicted, showing up in various publications and leading even to an appearance on the Teaching in Higher Ed podcast. If I had known the idea would be so resonant, I might have thought through the term more, but it's ended up doing some good work on its own, not least of which has been to show me just what our vocabulary is doing to us.

I have yet to encounter a teacher who openly wants their pedagogy to be cruel. The word is not one we like to associate with ourselves. But there is also — in myself and others — a resistance to the opposite of cruelty: kindness. An odd thing to resist on the face of it, but nonetheless, the resistance is real. Try it out for yourself. How do you feel when you say, "As a teacher, I strive to be kind," or, "I want to be known, first and foremost, as a kind teacher." Myself, I have learned to embrace

this and make it the core of my pedagogy, but it has taken me years to get a place of comfort with it, and there are days still when the old resistance rears up and the demon's sulfur clogs my senses.

Immediately, when I think of kindness I think of softness, of emotion rather than reason, of weakness. Obviously, this is the most basic, and toxic, way discourse both positions and devalues traits culturally coded as feminine. Caring gets seen as unmasculine, unmanly, emasculating. The work of caring, of emotion, of kindness becomes associated with a lack of power, a lack of value, a lack of seriousness. Such connotations are literally patriarchal, and they have led to terrible consequences for society — for instance, in the U.S., occupations associated with caring tend to be very badly paid. (A just society, a society that actually cared for its own flourishing, would prioritize work such as caring for children, teaching, nursing, caring for elderly people, working with mentally ill or marginalized people, etc. and deprioritize work that contributes less to that society.)

In addition to letting patriarchal connotations pass unchallenged, we may fall into eugenic thinking: a kind teacher is one who *coddles the undeserving*, who does not *cull the failures*, who *lets the impure pass*.

This insight raises the stakes for me. Not only do I want to avoid creating cruelty through my work, but I also want to purge myself of patriarchal and eugenic tendencies in my thoughts, tendencies that cling to words and the concepts those words express.

When I feel a resistance now to ideas of care and kindness, I try to recognize that resistance as a seductive poison constructed by elements of culture working against the survival of everything I value.

3.

In my late teens and early twenties, I sporadically practiced a secular type of meditation, then neglected the practice until it no longer existed for me. (During that time, I experienced significant mental illness that probably contributed to this neglect. I don't know that meditation would have helped — what helped, eventually, was hospitalization, therapy, and 20mg of Lexapro — but I should have kept it up.) A certain negative association grew in me because I associated that meditation practice with failure and with the most painful years of my life. Even as multiple friends embraced Buddhism (one becoming a Buddhist priest) and mindfulness practices, even as I read Taoist and Zen writings regularly, I clung to a staunchly and reductively materialist view of everything, including myself. In some ways, I suppose this was a defense mechanism. To keep from being overwhelmed, to avoid actively resisting my own existence, I needed to see my being and body as machines, as little more than chemical processes. Somehow, this made things comprehensible in a way I could bear. I found contentment, enough to get on with life.

Though I am still at heart a materialist, I shed the most dogmatic tendencies a good decade before the COVID-19 pandemic upended all of our lives in the winter of 2020, but the pandemic unsettled many conceptions I had relied on, revealing to me just how haphazard and whimsical they were. I had been free of the worst of clinical depression for fifteen years at that point, unmedicated since about 2008, generally content in the deep but cheery nihilism that grounded my worldview — I took some joy in the absurdity of living rather than despair in the meaninglessness of it all, and I found (and still find) real ethical purpose in the idea that we are all stuck here in meaninglessness together and therefore ought to be good to each other.

But going into the pandemic, my edges were already frayed. I had been struggling to do the one thing that had always provided meaning in my life: writing. Indeed, I think one reason why I was able to give up meditation long ago was because I found greater pleasure, meaning, and healing in the work of writing, which is very much not the same as meditation but nonetheless, for me at least, offered a parallel space. (It is probably no coincidence that the writing text I have most frequently assigned to students is Natalie Goldberg's *Wild Mind*, a book of writing exercises informed by Goldberg's Buddhist practice.) After completing my PhD dissertation, and then after my mother's death a few months later, and then the early death of one of my best friends in the writing community, writing got harder than it had ever been. With the pandemic, it became torture. Even when I managed to finish something, it felt dead on the page. Some of this was simply a false perception in the moment — there are essays, blog posts, stories that I wrote during this time that I can now look back on with some admiration, even as I remember the writing of them being excruciatingly slow and unfulfilling — but the days and days (sometimes weeks, even months) of staring at a blank screen or blank paper and getting nowhere were real. The despair sometimes became overwhelming. The one thing that I had been able to rely on since childhood — the writing — was just not there.

And then Barry Lopez died on December 25, 2020. In the summer of 2000, I had been a member of Lopez's workshop at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and it changed my life. I had arrived with skill but little purpose, and I left with an entirely new way of seeing my work. I had not thought about his lessons directly for a while, but when I learned that he had died, I dug out the old notebook with my notes from his workshop. Lopez's lessons were not about how to get published by *The New Yorker* or how to get an agent or how to write a best-selling novel or any of that. Lopez's lessons were about what

storytelling does in the world and what it might do, what power words have, what ideas we ought to devote ourselves to, what meaning there is in the work itself, regardless of whether anyone sees it. I returned to his ideas, to texts he recommended to us, to his own texts, to my beloved copies of Lao Tzu and Dōgen and the Chinese mountain poets and Japanese haiku writers. I set out to write a short essay about Lopez and ended up writing a 20,000 word piece in a couple weeks, the most fluent and passionate writing I had done in years.[1]

Not too long before Lopez's death, I discovered myself meditating again. I had last meditated formally about a year before I went to Bread Loaf. (One of the reasons I think I enjoyed Lopez's lessons was because they felt in many ways like meditation.) The return to this practice I had given up and in some ways shunned really was a matter of discovery, of my unconscious taking over and insisting that it needed some attention. I would be at home and find myself just sitting there, not looking at the tv or computer, not listening to music, not reading, not writing, just sitting. Recognizing that this was what my mind and body wanted, I became more deliberate in it. I have a room in the house without windows, and when I felt particularly overwhelmed by the world or work or existence, I would go there, turn off the lights, and let my senses have a break. I found myself remembering a phrase from Dōgen: *thinking not thinking*. Finally, I decided to give in and really do it, to return to setting at least half an hour a day aside (usually morning right when I get up) to sit on a cushion on the floor in whatever approximation of the lotus position my aging bones and hips will put up with … and just be.

I should emphasize that ultimately my return to meditation was a matter of desperation. It did not feel like a choice. More like survival. Honestly, it was either return to meditation

[1] This writing eventually became my book *About That Life: Barry Lopez and the Art of Community*.

or to medication, and I didn't feel in crisis enough for medication. (I am not anti-medication for mental health. I would have died without it. But I strongly prefer not to take it whenever I can do so safely.) It has been going well, but even here, now, writing all this, I feel resistance. The demon tells me this is *mindfulness* and *mindfulness* is about weakness, irrationality, softness; it is perhaps harmless, but nonetheless stupid and embarrassing, not something one should ever admit in public.

That demon needs to be exorcised.

4.

Consider the cover of the original edition of the first book the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh published in English: *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (1967). In some editions, it is subtitled *A Buddhist Proposal of Peace*. The photograph used on the cover of the original edition is of the revered Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức in the midst of self-immolation.

For the full context, I recommend Marc Andrus's book *Brothers in the Beloved Community: The Friendship of Thich Nhat Hanh and Martin Luther King, Jr.*, which includes the first letter Nhat Hanh wrote to King, initiating their friendship, a letter explaining why the self-immolations of Buddhist priests are not best interpreted as suicide or even as protest:

> The monk who burns himself has lost neither courage nor hope; nor does he desire non-existence. On the contrary, he is very courageous and hopeful and aspires for something good in the future. He does not think that he is destroying himself; he believes in the good fruition of his act of self-sacrifice for the sake of others. Like the Buddha in one of his former lives — as told in a story of Jataka

> — who gave himself to a hungry lion which was about to devour her own cubs, the monk believes he is practicing the doctrine of highest compassion by sacrificing himself in order to call the attention of, and to seek help from, the people of the world.[2]

The cover of Thich Nhat Hanh's book shows the moment of sacrifice. It disturbs. It seeks to bring kindness and compassion to the world, but the image is an attack on our sense of propriety, a scream against our complacency. You could never call that image weak; it brings not just strength but almost unimaginable fierceness to its work of compassion.

I have been thinking about Thich Nhat Hanh a lot recently because he died two weeks ago as I write this. His was probably the first Buddhist name I ever knew. Decades ago, a trusted friend told me to read *Being Peace*, and so I did, and it annoyed me. Often, the book's sentences seemed vague, its guidance impractical. What really bothered me, though, was something I couldn't identify at the time. Though I was, then, more or less committed to pacifism, I also wanted to bring fiery destruction down on everyone I disagreed with. Chapter 5, titled "Working for Peace", was one I hoped would have ideas I could put into practice (to peacefully destroy my enemies, I suppose). Instead, it began with a story I found repulsive, a story of Nhat Hanh meditating about the Thai sea pirates who had raped a 12-year-old Vietnamese girl who then jumped from the boat and drowned. He meditated to find a way to understand these pirates and their destructive acts. I thought it was nauseating.

Then the passage that I still remember hardly being able to get through because it raised such anger in me:

> During the war in Vietnam, we young Buddhists organized ourselves to help victims of the war rebuild

[2] *Brothers in the Beloved Community: The Friendship of Thich Nhat Hanh and Martin Luther King Jr.* by Marc Andrus. Parallax Press, 2021, 19-20.

> villages that had been destroyed by the bombs. Many of us died during service, not only because of the bombs and the bullets, but because of the people who suspected us of being on the other side. We were able to understand the suffering of both sides, the communists and the anti-communists. We tried to be open to both, to understand this side and to understand that side, to be one with them. That is why we did not take a side, even though the whole world took sides. We tried to tell people our perception of the situation: that we wanted to stop the fighting. But the bombs were so loud. Sometimes we had to burn ourselves alive to get the message across, but even then the world couldn't hear us. They thought it was a political action. They didn't know that it was a purely human action to be heard, to be understood. We didn't want a victory, we wanted reconciliation. Working to help people in a circumstance like that is very dangerous, and many of my friends were killed. The communists killed us because they suspected that we were working with the Americans, and the anti-communists killed us because they thought that we were with the communists. But we didn't give up and we didn't take sides.[3]

That first time reading this passage, I closed the book and returned it to the library. (Or maybe to my friend? I don't remember. All I remember is it had a different cover from the edition I now have.) I remember thinking this book was written by a person so out of touch with reality that his ideas were useless to me. I was all for peace (I thought), but I was also all for taking sides. Despite all this obvious suffering, despite the destruction of so much that he himself loved, *he wouldn't take sides?!?* Lunacy!

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[3] Hanh, Thich Nhat. *Being Peace*. 1988; Parallax Press, 2005, 65.

Eventually, I came back to the book. I learned to sit with my discomfort, my resistance, my anger. I quickly embraced most of the other pages, even some of the pages in that disturbing fifth chapter. (I had learned to read books like Nhat Hanh's as I read poetry. Trying to read them as expository prose hid their density, complexity, usefulness.) It remains a book I cherish because it remains a book I continue to struggle with.

Right now, though, I come back to the cover of *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*. I do not want anyone literally to light themselves on fire, least of all myself. Yet it seems important to me that we let that image of Thích Quảng Đức live in our minds, that we live with it as an image not only of sacrifice but of the strength that kindness and compassion require in a world designed against them.

5.

When kindness, compassion, and peace are distant; when they seem absent from our lives and world; when cruelty, indifference, and insensitivity are dominant forces — then we must oppose these powerful, overwhelming forces with their opposites, and doing so will require extraordinary strength and commitment.

Here is the beginning of Ursula Le Guin's adaptation of the forty-third chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*:

> What's softest in the world
> rushes and runs
> over what's hardest in the world.

I want to believe that is true. Many days, though, it feels like the world only grows harder, while the wellsprings of rushing water dry up.

6.

In literary studies, there has been over the last decade or so a movement toward "post-critical" theory, most prominently in the work of Rita Felski, whose *The Limits of Critique* became something of a bestseller in its niche (partly because its publisher released it as an affordable paperback). I find Felski's work frustrating for various reasons, but I am also drawn, like her, to seeking other approaches to analyze and discuss texts than the ever-suspicious and ever-critical.

Recently, working with a PhD student, I encouraged him not to go to war in his writing, not to seek enemies to obliterate, sins to prosecute. He was good at being a critical warrior and hanging judge because it's what he's been shown that academic reading is for, and it appealed to him emotionally. I know this appeal deeply. There is a pleasure to be had in swinging the intellectual blade of our righteousness against textual wrongs. I have also learned, through hard experience, that more often than not such pleasure is not the pleasure of accuracy and truth, but the pleasure of domination. It is the triumph of ego over the object the ego comes in contact with. Again and again, it lessens insight rather than deepens it. Often, it leads to pain.

The desire to slash and burn our way across everything that seems WRONG in a work of literature is familiar, but I have also come to believe it is a psychological defense mechanism to protect us from the recognition of our own limitations, failures, hypocrisies, complacencies, complicities. The fire that fuels the machineries of our critique is, too often, kindled by

our own fear of error. At least, that has been my own experience.

Karolyn Kinane writes in an essay on contemplative reading:

> Before designing a contemplative assignment for my early British literature survey course and Senior Seminar on Mysticism and Contemplation, I identified the two things I had hoped contemplative practice could transform. First, students come to my classes with a firm sense of themselves as tolerant (or justified in their intolerance) that I want them to rethink. The assignment, therefore, aims to help students recognize their own intolerance. Second, students have a firm sense of an Other in place: The (medieval) past and (Christian) religious texts may be quaint historical artifacts, but they have nothing to teach us now. The assignment, therefore, encourages students to practice generous reading and to "try on" an attitude of curiosity so that they may see beyond what they expect to see (counteracting confirmation bias).[4]

The essay goes on to explain ways of encouraging this generous thinking in students. Have students write about their moment-to-moment awareness as a reader, about the experiences and attitudes that inform their attractions and aversions, encourage them to return to the text to see novelty or something they didn't notice before, to imagine the text as a friend in conversation. It's a marvelous approach, one I have only occasionally stumbled on via, for instance, using Peter

[4] Kinane, Karolyn. "Contemplative Reading: Generosity, Meaning-Making, Intolerance." *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (2021): 73–90. Available at https://digscholarship.unco.edu/joci/vol8/iss1/5

Elbow's "believing and doubting games".[5] Mostly, I have tried to model for students more generous ways of thinking about texts and ideas, or have asked them to try to think more openly about what they read, but mine were not especially effective approaches. The practical, specific ways of thinking Kinane offers are better.

Even more valuable is an idea that comes a few pages later in the essay. Students — people! — often assign to objects of study immutable properties or values that are, in fact, mutable elements of the scholar's own personality, beliefs, experiences, and prejudices. In many ways, this is an essential part of reading and thinking. It is hard to know or learn anything without projecting some of our self into it. But it is exactly in that projection that we must be especially mindful, especially careful. (A friend recently said, of a book I admire greatly, "Clearly, this is a flawed text," a statement which is itself more flawed than the text under discussion, because what my friend really was saying was, "This novel does not conform to my own aesthetic principles," a very different thing, indeed.) Kinane writes that the process of noticing how we read is key to making sense of what it is we are reading:

A key step in this "noticing" requires students to own the feelings and thoughts that arise through reading a text rather than projecting them on to the text. That is, rather than saying, "This poem is boring" or "This writer is making me angry," students say "I'm starting to get bored at this place in the poem," or "I'm getting angry at this passage." Outside of this assignment, we practice noticing when reactions arise and owning those reactions in a brief activity I call "changing the grammar of our thoughts." Here, students write sentences about non-volatile things that "are annoying" or "are great" in their lives. They then re-write these statements until 1) they themselves

[5] For some explanation of the "believing and doubting games", see Craig Stroupe's explanations at https://www.d.umn.edu/~cstroupe/ideas/believing.html.

are the subject in the statements and situation and 2) they note the detail they are responding to. For example, "My roommate is annoying" becomes "I get annoyed when my roommate slams the door." And, "Weekends are great" becomes "I really like weekends when I can hike." This exercise highlights students' agency in situations, ensures the Other is not monolithic, and cultivates precision and vividness in students' writing.

The exercise also helps relieve students of the feeling that they must speak from some outside position about the text, a feeling that often leads to the kind of oracular pronouncements that "this is a flawed text" represents.

(A bit of a tangent: This kind of highlighting of subjectivity is deeply annoying to some teachers and pundits who feel that it encourages narcissism. Interestingly, a lot of the same feeling can be found in articles and books that critique mindfulness practices. Certainly, there are methods of approaching texts — and definitely methods of approaching mindfulness — that are fundamentally narcissistic in any definition of *narcissism* that you want to use. But that's true of everything, and avoiding subjectivity [or mindfulness] is no way to avoid narcissism. Avoiding subjectivity just means leaving your narcissism unrecognized, or repressed, or disguised. Look back at literary criticism from a century ago, when a pose of objectivity was the rule of law. Much of that writing reads badly today because it sounds like the bloviations of a self-satisfied man who thinks his every little opinion has been written on stone tablets and handed down by God.)

Context is important. Kinane notes:

> It is likely that your students are radically different from mine. If students come to your courses uncritically revering the Great Authors and ready to embrace the timeless wisdom of a romanticized medieval era, your intention for transformation may be different from mine. As a result, your contemplative

> practice or assignment will look different. What I want to encourage in my fellow instructors is not rote adoption of my assignment, which may be completely inappropriate for your contexts, but rather deep reflection on what your pedagogy is doing, and why, and how within your own contexts.[6]

This brings us to an important point: kindness, compassion, generosity, and other positive values should not be deployed as airy abstractions. They have little meaning unto themselves, and they do not gain strength from vagueness.

One of the things that sometimes happens when I talk about cruelty and syllabi is that people ask about a general policy — an attendance policy, for instance — wondering if it is an example of cruelty. Without context, there is no way to say. There are times when attendance policies are probably quite kind, generous, and compassionate. Heck, there are probably times when standardized tests are kind, generous, and compassionate: maybe not to the student taking them, exactly, but perhaps for the patient who needs to be treated by a nurse in an emergency and needs that nurse to be able to respond quickly and knowledgeably, and the way we know nurses can do that is that they can pass tests demonstrating it. (Whether standardized tests demonstrate such things or not, I leave to you to decide.)

At a workshop, a teacher said to me, "I hold my students to high standards because it is kind and compassionate to give them expectations and not to pretend that bad work is good." This statement is a valuable example because it may seem specific, but without context it actually says nothing. What are the standards and expectations? How do you communicate those standards — how do you "hold" expectations? How do you distinguish high standards and expectations from low? What differentiates bad work from good, and how do you assess that? I

[6] Kinane, 80.

can imagine ways of doing all of these things that come from a place of loving kindness and that communicate that loving kindness. I can also, even more easily, imagine ways that this teacher may think they are being kind, and may even want to be kind, but they are putting their policies into practice in ways that create anxiety, fear, and withdrawal in students. An unreflective, ego-based idea of our own authoritarian "kindness" in fact works against everything we may be trying to do — foster creativity and curiosity, encourage students to challenge themselves, develop expertise in complex and difficult disciplines. I have been that teacher, convinced of my own kindness when my policies and behaviors in fact were closer to cruelty. It is one of the great regrets of my life.

7.

For over two years now, I have been trying to turn my work on cruelty-free teaching into a well-developed article or even a book. I have never gotten farther than writing six or seven thousand words, and none of those words are, yet, ones I think have much value. Part of the problem is the problem I have been having, generally, with writing, described above. A far bigger problem is that everything I have to say about cruelty-free practices feels terribly obvious and unoriginal. Don't read me; read Paolo Freire and bell hooks and Paul Goodman and Jonathan Kozol and Cathy Davidson; read the wonderful books in the Teaching and Learning in Higher Education series from West Virginia University Press; read in whatever religious or spiritual or philosophical or literary tradition most challenges you toward generosity and compassion…

And yet, tempting as it is to blame the difficulty of writing or the impossibility of originality, that's not exactly it. Writing has often been difficult for me, originality is a concept I barely

even believe in. The problem goes back to what I wrote about earlier. Our vocabulary did this to me. *Kindness, compassion, generosity*, and *contemplation* still feel somehow like they are not the words that are going to do anything but give nice feelings to the choir used to being preached to. Meanwhile, public education in the United States will continue to be neglected, teachers will continue to be degraded and distrusted, the public discourse will continue to be toxic, violence of all types will spread. Kindness, compassion, generosity, and contemplation feel inadequate to the storms destroying everything good in this world. Year after year after year, it seems the only people who get what they want from the world are the people who embrace cruelty, greed, authority, austerity. Against that, kindness does not feel strong.

But kindness must be strong. There is no choice. If I decide to give up on kindness because it feels weak, to embrace cruelty because it feels strong, to go out and embody the "hard truths of the world" and not let anybody get away with anything and be sure I get mine etc. etc. etc. — if I turn toward monstrosity, then I am not helping strengthen kindness or open up new possibilities for future progress, I am only becoming a monster.

8.

Better not to blather on about these things. Better to be and do. Poetry knows that best. Here, then, some Liu Tsung-Yuan in translation by Red Pine, a poem with one of the longest titles I know:

Along the Road Past Shangshan There Was a Lone Pine to Which Someone Took an Ax for More Light. A Kind Person Took Pity and Built a Bamboo Fence Around What Remained, and It Responded with New Growth. Moved, I Wrote This Poem

by Liu Tsung-Yuan (773-819)

A lone pine shaded a rest stop with green
putting down roots beside a dirt road
it didn't need to guard against the heights
it was injured for the sake of more light
luckily a kindhearted person came along
surrounding it with a fence
part of its heart survived
enough to feel the rain and dew[7]

—February 2022

[7] Tsung-yuan, Liu. *Written in Exile: The Poetry of Liu Tsung-Yuan*. Translated by Red Pine. Copper Canyon Press, 2019.

Thinking About Generous Thinking

Kathleen Fitzpatrick defines "generous thinking" as "a mode of engagement that emphasizes listening over speaking, community over individualism, collaboration over competition, and lingering with the ideas that are in front of us rather than continually pressing forward to where we want to go."[1] Her book provides a vision for the university as a public good, and she is interested in thinking both about how individual institutions can be stronger communities than they currently are, and about how individual institutions can interact more effectively (and more generously) with the communities beyond their ivy-covered walls.

She wonders what if "the university's values and commitments made it possible for those of us who work on campus to develop a new understanding of how expertise is structured and how it functions, an understanding focused just a bit less on individual achievement, on invidious distinction? What if the expertise the university cultivated were at its root connected to building forms of collectivity, solidarity, and community both on campus and off?" This goes to the core mission of the institution itself: "What new purposes for the university might we imagine if we understand its role to be not inculcating state citizens, nor training corporate citizens, but instead facilitating the development of diverse, open communities — both on their campuses and across their borders — encouraged

[1] Fitzpatrick, *Generous Thinking,* 4.

to think together, to be involved in the ongoing project of how we understand and shape our world?"[2]

U.S. universities are, generally speaking, not built on premises of generosity, but rather on premises of competition. At their very basic level, almost all are designed to let certain people in and keep others out. The rapid advance of privatization in public universities has led to a diminishment of the idea of universities as a public good — as institutions that bring value not just to the individuals who work and learn there, but to the community such an institution is part of, and to society as a whole. This diminishment is addressed by Fitzpatrick, who makes reference to a book that chronicles it particularly well, Christopher Newfield's *The Great Mistake*. Perhaps, Fitzpatrick suggests, by rethinking the university toward generosity rather than competition we can recover a sense of higher education's best purpose.

Toward that goal, she returns repeatedly to basic strategies and values: listening, collaborating, working in public, working to break down borders, trying to find solidarity, trying to build coalitions and communities.

Fitzpatrick is not a woo-woo idealist. She is aware of the ways that different circumstances, differing levels of power, and different types of privilege affect her ideas. As much as she advocates for conversation based on careful, deliberate listening, she knows that "listening as a ground for generosity, as a means of working through disagreement, must be mutual, or at least have the potential for mutuality."[3] Without such potential, listening becomes a hollow exercise, one with real dangers, especially for marginalized people. What you can listen to, what you can put up with, depends on your own circumstances. If you're trying to build a coalition, you're going to need to listen to people who disagree with you, people who perhaps even

[2] Fitzpatrick, 44-45.
[3] Fitzpatrick, 77.

think of you as lesser than themselves. That requires some strength and confidence; until you've built up that strength and confidence, you may need the listening of sympathetic ears more than you need a coalition.

What I like about *Generous Thinking* is that is suggests some bedrock values we might work from. Generosity as opposed to competition. Community as opposed to hierarchical domination. Solidarity as opposed to elitism. Openness.

Fitzpatrick points to two broad types of university community: inside the institution and outside of it. These communities overlap and ought to interact, but if we're thinking about how to adjust the institution, we might gain from thinking about the two broad communities separately at first. While much can be said about how a university interacts with communities beyond its borders, here I want to think about the community inside the institution's bounds.

Community: Inside

What does it mean for a university to be a community? Is the university community the one that gets celebrated in marketing materials and commencement speeches? What does it mean to have your paycheck provided by, and your career controlled by, the administrators of the community? What does it mean to pay to become a member of the community — and, more often than not, to go into significant debt for that membership?

These days, most universities try to pay attention to the communities beyond their own. There are community service projects and internships, as well as external partnerships between various programs and outside organizations and businesses. However, Fitzpatrick makes an important point: "No amount of service learning or community-engaged research

has thus far succeeded in transforming the structure of our institutions — any of our institutions — or the ways they are perceived and experienced by the public in general. If anything, we lay the groundwork for an inevitable betrayal of the public trust every time we focus on building such programs without building corresponding internal policies and structures in line with them."[4] In *The Great Mistake*, Newfield demonstrates the ways many external partnerships undermine the public good that universities strive for, with businesses able to leverage state funding and student tuition money for their own purposes. Nonetheless, it doesn't feel especially difficult to identify what the communities outside the institution are.

But within the institution, the community may be harder to identify, because if we want the word to have any meaning, it needs to be more than just the people who are on campus. That's the institution's population, not a community.

"Is it scalable?" is a question we often hear these days. I wonder about that with community. How can we make a place of thousands — or tens of thousands — of people feel like a community? Beyond *feel like*, how can we make such a place *function* as a community?

The social sciences have studied community for a long time. I am not a social scientist, so my understanding is superficial, but maybe superficial is enough to get us going. For our purposes here, let's go back to the influential 1986 article, "Sense of Community: Definition and Theory" by David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis.[5] It's well known and widely available. McMillan and Chavis identify four features leading to a sense of community:

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[4] Fitzpatrick, 223-224.

[5] McMillan, David W., and David M. Chavis. "Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory." *Journal of Community Psychology* 14, no. January (1986): 6–23. https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6629(198601)14:1%3C6::AID-JCOP2290140103%3E3.0.CO;2-I

The first element is **membership**. Membership is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. The second element is **influence**, a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members. The third element is **reinforcement**: integration and fulfillment of needs. This is the feeling that members' needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group. The last element is **shared emotional connection,** the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences.

As McMillan and Chavis point out, these are not inherently *good* qualities. Membership, for instance, requires boundaries. It creates insiders and outsiders, deviants. And even though the word *community* tends to have a positive connotation, we should be wary of that connotation. A murderous, racist militia group is a community just as much as a committedly nonviolent organic farming cooperative is. Corporate CEOs throw the word around even more freely than they evade taxes. Facebook loves to tout itself as a community. Community by itself is more a description than a value. It is a tool that may facilitate and enhance the values you want to bring forward … or it may not.

Good liberals like ourselves of course seek peace, love, and understanding. We pride ourselves on our tolerance and openness. So, thinking about community membership, we might not like the idea of creating insiders and outsiders. But it's worth considering how community membership can be used to reinforce the values we want our community to uphold. There are all sorts of paradoxes in the concept of toleration, and whatever we may think of Karl Popper, it's worth at least giving some good, hard thought to his paradox of tolerance ("Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance.") and consider that perhaps a resilient community must declare

as deviant the values and behaviors that dilute and eventually destroy its own core values.[6]

With Newfield and Fitzpatrick in mind, then, we might say that privatization and competition are values/behaviors that undermine the generous community of a public university, and should therefore be kept in check, if not shunned altogether. Members of a generous community are not in competition with each other, but rather seek to build cooperation and solidarity. People committed to competition should look elsewhere for a community of their own.

That's an example. There are likely good arguments against it, for instance from sports enthusiasts (who might stand up and advocate for the benefits of competition). The conversation itself would be more valuable than any hard and fast rule. Indeed, it seems to me that communities ought to be built around cooperative communication about the community's values, and such conversations will probably find that many community rules ought to serve as guidelines, not hard-and-fast laws. A community discussion clarifying how sports teams contribute to a sense of community, and how they demonstrate some positive elements of competition, would likely bring clarity and cohesion to the community. Resilient communities are dynamic.

Here we see an idea Fitzpatrick raises at various points: the need to articulate and discuss values. I've been at institutions where the supposed values of the place were shared via banners and brochures created by the institution's marketing department, and my suspicion was that those values were ones that had been imposed from on high by administrators. Events

[6] See "The Paradox of Karl Popper" by John Horgan, *Scientific American,* 22 August 2018: https://www.scientificamerican.com/blog/cross-check/the-paradox-of-karl-popper/. The online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy also has a good entry on the concept of "Toleration" at https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/toleration/.

often made me skeptical about whether the administrators actually believed in them. A coherent community doesn't just have a list of values; the members of the community can articulate what those values mean in action.[7]

There are many qualities of internal community we could discuss and elaborate here, but I want to focus on one last one: *agency*. McMillan and Chavis identify *influence* as one of their four qualities leading to a sense of community, a quality with various implications: a healthy community is one that is both influenced by its members and that influences its members. It's the former that I want to think about here in terms of a university community. How might every member of the community have a sense of meaningful agency? How might every member be able to shape the environment of the community?

This is about empowerment. Perhaps the place to start, then, is with the most disempowered. Those of us with some power in a university might do well to ask ourselves: Who is most disempowered here, and what could we do to better empower them? How might we increase agency and influence, and thus strengthen the community itself?

For myself, I've focused on thinking about student empowerment within my classes, the environment I most control. I have de-emphasized grades, increased student choice in how we approach the work of the course, sought to make my courses as accessible as possible to various types of learners, tried to reduce authoritarianism in my course policies and demeanor, etc. It's an ongoing process, as it should be —

[7] Now, quite a few years after writing this essay, I would point to how easily so many U.S. institutions abandoned the supposed values they trumpeted for purposes of public relations after the Black Lives Matter summer of 2020, when for a few months it seemed like every university and corporation was rushing to publicize just how diverse, tolerant, and willing to learn from past mistakes it was. These claims were obviously hollow and their utter mendacity was proved in 2025 when almost all of those corporations and universities rushed to embrace Donald Trump's racism, xenophobia, and fascism.

communities are dynamic and we human beings are defined by nothing so much as our fallibility. But by sticking to some basic values (openness, cooperation, empowerment), I've been able to bring myself back on track when it felt like what I was doing in class was going astray. More importantly, by articulating these values to students in my courses, I've been able to ask them to help us keep on track. Communities can become self-regulating organisms when values are known, discussed, and evaluated by community members who have agency within the community.

The Public Good

At the end of *The Great Mistake*, Christopher Newfield outlines a "recovery cycle" for public universities, a cycle that begins with recognizing the university as a public good. Newfield argues that public funding is the only mechanism that has led historically to a maximization of the benefits that universities provide to communities and societies, and this argument is one that everyone seeking to save public education ought to make, rather than continuing to make the argument that public education exists solely for individual benefit. In *Generous Thinking,* Fitzpatrick asks, "What might become possible if we were able to decide that the real competition is not among institutions of higher education but rather between a vision of higher education as a public good and an understanding of higher education as a private responsibility?"[8]

Many things might become possible, but first we have to think about how to do this. How do we, as Fitzpatrick advocates, "build collectively the systems and capacities that all in-

[8] Fitzpatrick, 187.

stitutions of higher education need in order for the entire sector to thrive"? Aside from getting a bunch of us with this vision elected to public office, what can we do?

At the most basic level, we can do our best within the environments that we have some influence over. I can change my classroom practices. I can communicate with students and colleagues in a way that shares my vision of what education is and ought to be. I can evaluate my interactions to see if I'm holding to my principals. I can look for opportunities to encourage and empower other people on campus toward ideas of education as cooperation and collaboration, as something that contributes to society at least as much as it contributes to individuals. I can seek out collaborations beyond my own corner of the community. This work may feel small and insignificant, and it may be small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things, but that doesn't mean it's not worthwhile. My first teaching responsibilities were during my undergrad years when I worked part-time (through the AmeriCorps program) at a school profiled in a book called *Small Victories*, and if I believe anything about education, it's that small victories matter.[9]

To move beyond the basic level, we would need to evaluate where we have influence, and where we might expand our influence. We have to think about propaganda in a positive sense. If we believe in our vision of education as a public good, how do we spread that vision? How do we put its principles into action? How do we measure our success? (And what are the perils?)

Perhaps if enough people at an institution commit to a vision of collaboration, cooperation, and solidarity then that vision will begin to be articulated and shared by the institution itself … and maybe if the institution itself articulates and shares the vision, then it will reach beyond the institution, and do

[9] Freedman, Samuel G. *Small Victories: The Real World of a Teacher, Her Students, and Their High School*. Harper & Row, 1990.

some work out in the world, increasing a sense of the university as a public good … and maybe if the vision does some work out in the world, a bit of that work will feed back into the institution…

It's a hugely idealistic concept, but we need some idealism to energize our days.

What Can We Do?

For now, though, and less idealistically, there's what we can each do ourselves. I've thought of this a lot as I've recently joined the elite ranks of the tenure-tracked. I've spent the last eleven years as an adjunct, a grad student, and a one-year contracted faculty member. Contingent positions, subordinate positions. Positions without a whole lot of influence on the community beyond individual classes. But now I do have some more influence. Not over the state legislature that controls some of our resources, nor even much over the administration of the institution itself, but I certainly have influence within a sphere of that institution in a way I did not before. How to use it for good? I don't have a set answer for that question; rather, I use the question itself to evaluate what I'm trying to do.

Don't be evil was a good motto for Google, though one they couldn't live up to. Maybe we can. And maybe we can be better. Maybe we can, generously, with solidarity, work toward doing good work for the public good. Maybe, if we evaluate what we have control and influence over, we can spread that vision and not become overwhelmed by its opposite, the vision of competition, individualism, and authoritarianism that currently dominates.

Fitzpatrick writes:

> The political and institutional obstacles in front of us, the blockages that prevent us from creating the kinds of universities that might be communities, that might support communities, are huge. Our thinking

> must be equally so. And that requires all of us to think beyond our local allegiances, beyond our own situations, and to develop new forms of solidarity, of commitment, to one another.[10]

That means that administrators and tenured faculty need to be fiercely aware of their privileges and complicities, that we must all recognize the ways that the hierarchical structure of the institution undermines community, that we must acknowledge borders and exclusions — and we must use this awareness, recognition, and acknowledgment not to bemoan our circumstances and revel in despair, but to work to increase agency, involvement, and community around the shared goal of a university: to create spaces for learning.

That's what gives me hope, even amidst all the overwhelming obstacles to generous thinking and generous work. We who work at universities in whatever capacity — administrators, faculty, staff, students — are at this place to encourage learning and to honor knowledge. Everything else is gravy and whipped cream. If we can keep our most basic purpose (learning; knowledge) at the forefront, and if we can keep working together to clarify and enact our values, then we can keep moving forward.

These days, any forward movement is a real success.

Appendix: Qualms

Drafting this essay, I wrote a few paragraphs digging into some misgivings I have with the book, but rereading what I wrote, it seemed tangential to what is worthwhile in Fitzpatrick's ideas, which is what I want to focus on. I still have these qualms, which likely say as much about me as about the book,

[10] Fitzpatrick, 235.

so will note them here, but I hope nothing I say here detracts from what I wrote above.

I sensed a certain disciplinary or epistemological bias from Fitzpatrick. I may be overly self-critical, but I wasn't especially comfortable with the second chapter of the book, "Reading Together", which engages with recent ideas from Rita Felski in particular.[11] This chapter seemed to me the kind of thing we English teachers like, but which perhaps will alienate, or at least puzzle, people in fields less devoted to the particularities of interpreting texts. In later chapters, Fitzpatrick does a good job of bringing in voices and perspectives from outside her discipline, but I couldn't help feeling it was awfully convenient for an English professor to make her second chapter about reading.[12] (And a long chapter, too. I'm interested in the particularities of interpreting texts and I thought the chapter was interminable. What might a mathematician make of it?) Even in later chapters, where Fitzpatrick reaches beyond her own discipline, her bias returns in how and what she values. For instance, late in the book she writes:

> It is in focusing on community at all levels, rather than on particular skills and fields of knowledge, that I believe the university can make its greatest contribution to its culture, helping to ensure that we become a strong, functioning democracy. Scholars

[11] See *The Limits of Critique* (University of Chicago Press, 2015); also *Critique and Post-Critique* ed. Felski and Elizabeth S. Anker (Duke University Press, 2017).

[12] I might now, quite a few years later, temper my criticism of Fitzpatrick's chapter in light of the fact that the practice of reading has become a vital topic in many disciplines seeing significant declines in students' reading and thinking skills. This is, in fact, a crisis for democracy, since democracy is premised on citizens being able to access good, rich information about their government and to think critically about that information. *Close Reading for the Twenty-First Century* edited by Dan Sinykin and Johanna Winant is a good place to start for an overview of these ideas in an interdisciplinary context. Fitzpatrick could have expressed the idea a bit more interdisciplinarily, but I think now that she was more right about all this than I was.

> such as Martha Nussbaum have pointed to the role of the humanities — especially philosophy, history, and literature — in cultivating "the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a 'citizen of the world'; and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person," abilities that are, she argues, "crucial to the health of any democracy internally, and to the creation of a decent world culture capable of constructively addressing the world's most pressing problems.[13]

I groaned, reading this. Of *course* someone in the humanities would say this. Only the most self-abasing person would say, "The thing I've devoted my life to is not actually of much use to the world, and might even be an enabler of evil." But though we in the humanities understandably value what we do, there are problems with what Nussbaum states and Fitzpatrick paraphrases, problems of an imperial will to power, of white saviorism, of simple arrogance. We must always remember that many of the greatest crimes in history were enabled by people well versed in the humanities. Imperialism, for instance, got (and gets) justified by the humanities as a process of *civilizing*. Remember: Joseph Goebbels had a Ph.D. in literature. Young Joseph Stalin wrote poetry. Henry Kissinger is well read.

I thought Fitzpatrick might offer some critique of Nussbaum's statements — Fitzpatrick says, of what is learned through the humanities, "But those abilities alone cannot be enough; the study of philosophy, history, and literature (or music, or art, or theatre) may expose students to the possibility of empathetic connection but such studies cannot in and of themselves instill the value of connection in ways that can genuinely transform a community or a culture." That's not the

[13] Fitzpatrick, 213.

critique I hoped for. (Being post-critique can be dangerous. There are things such as the wielding of power toward which we ought always to be skeptical, authorities we ought always to question.) I like what Fitzpatrick says next, which I'll get to in a moment, but lacking an understanding of the limits of the humanities (and limits to the usefulness of empathy) highlights something that caused me some qualms as I read: the book's tendency to let feel-good words like *community* carry too much weight. As David Banks and Britney Gill point out, *community* is a word that easily misleads.[14] Fitzpatrick is admirably inclusive in many ways throughout the book, admirably clear-eyed about the perils of certain practices for marginalized people especially, but though the subtitle of the book is *A Radical Approach to Saving the University*, it is not in a political sense radical, but comfortably liberal. This is not to say the subtitle is wrong, though. It is true that this vision of the university is, for the current environment, a radical one both in the etymological sense of getting back to the roots and in the general sense of being very different from the status quo. That's a significant condemnation of the status quo. This *shouldn't* be a radical vision; yet it is.

All words potentially mislead, and all words may be co-opted — just look at the ways ostensibly nice words like *open* and *free* get used on things that are their opposites. I don't want to linger long on the perils of the humanities or the nefarious uses of words like *community,* because what matters is Fitzpatrick's vision, a vision that I agree we need now in our educational institutions if they are to survive as anything other than debt-inducing credentialing agencies. But perhaps a part of generous thinking is also to register qualms.

—July 2019

[14] Banks, David A., and Britney Gil. "Bad Metaphors: Community." Real Life. Accessed December 31, 2025. https://reallifemag.com/bad-metaphors-community/.

Generous Thinking Now

> "We're in a bad time for everybody. There are very few models as to our way to be drawn upon in any community. There certainly are no states that one could look to and say, 'A revolution has occurred here; they're acting better toward people.' And the religious are going the way of the state; obsession with survival at any price. There is a terrible casuistry that trades off human bodies and looks on an abstract, future good as an excuse for present evil."
>
> —Daniel Berrigan in *The Raft Is Not the Shore* by Thich Nhat Hanh and Daniel Berrigan (1975), p.22

Recently, the Open Learning & Teaching Collaborative at Plymouth State University (where I work) hosted two events that fit well together: Jesse Stommel led a conversation on care & equity in teaching and Kathleen Fitzpatrick gave a keynote presentation on generous thinking.[1] Here, I want to think about these two events together, and also relate them back to my 2019 post about Fitzgerald's book *Generous Thinking* as well as my essay "Five Values", written a month after that *Generous Thinking* post.

[1] Both are available on YouTube at the PSU Open channel: "A Conversation about Care & Equity with Jesse Stommel" (https://youtu.be/QaUA8A4b1BA?si=CyXw1S84n3Zeqhhp) and "Kathleen Fitzpatrick Discusses "Generous Thinking" for Plymouth State University CPLC Keynote" (https://youtu.be/RC8uN1NuvXQ?si=7M4hD3u6GDnU1DWj).

Note the date of those posts about generous thinking and values: summer 2019. Do you remember the summer of 2019? I don't remember much about it specifically, but I know one obvious thing: we did not know how thoroughly our whole world was about to get upended. I remember the summer of 2020 far more vividly. That was the first summer of COVID, and it was also the summer of protests. George Floyd was murdered by police in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020. What followed got called "unrest". And then? Lots of statements about equity and justice, far less action to create equity and justice. If I know anything about the future, I know there will be more unrest. We live in unrestful days.

Between the summer of 2019 and the fall of 2020, my university system offered a generous (truly!) retirement package and a similar voluntary separation package. Hundreds of faculty and staff across our schools took advantage of what was likely to be a once-in-a-lifetime deal. Many — most? — positions were not replaced, even though there was no apparent strategy determining which positions went away. Additionally, impressively stubborn, even Machiavellian, moves by administrators rammed through the cancellation of entire majors. Chaos thrived, morale plummeted. Full-time faculty quit their jobs to go, for instance, teach middle school. Or they left academia altogether. My school in the fall of 2020 felt depopulated, a ghost town. A giant chunk of institutional memory evaporated in a matter of months. (My own program did okay, and we worked hard to keep things afloat at the CoLab. I felt a certain survivor's guilt for this, an embarrassment at having a budget and a basically secure position, at least as secure as anything felt in those days. All around me, colleagues and friends were riddled with anxiety and anguish. I volunteered for too many committees, wanting my relative security to be useful somehow.)

In the conversation on equity and care, Jesse Stommel says he's usually an optimist, but admits he has trouble being

optimistic about higher education these days. I've never been an optimist about much of anything, so I have had less to adjust to. Still, pessimism doesn't mean wishing for the world to conform to your expectation that everything will turn out badly. A few pleasant surprises would be nice.

The pandemic added new force to this statement from *Generous Thinking*: "What if the expertise that the university cultivated were at its root connected to building forms of collectivity, solidarity, and community both on campus and off?"[2] A public health emergency thins the wall between the campus and the community beyond it. It was hard, even impossible, for us to keep our COVID numbers down when they were rising through the community around the campus, and the community around the campus was understandably wary of thousands of college kids coming back from all over the country. Within schools themselves, teachers, students, staff, and administrators either found ways to work together with a sense of collective purpose or they fell apart in despair and mutual recrimination and bitterness. We saw impressive examples of solidarity as well as disheartening moments of greed, selfishness, and sociopathy.

Austerity measures made it all worse. Austerity had long been an administrative practice before the pandemic, but COVID ramped it up. Life got squeezed into a spreadsheet.

Now, there aren't enough people to do the work, and chaos has caused us not to know who does what work that is still getting done. The effect is to turn people against each other, because every request anybody makes is more work for people who have too much work — which means all requests, regardless of what they are, are little bits of pain. Needles keep getting tossed onto the camel's broken back.

In such an environment, we must be careful about the repercussions of our caring, the unintended consequences of

[2] Fitzgerald, *Generous Thinking*, 44.

our good intentions. Compassion is easy when its only effect is everybody's happiness. But that is rarely possible when compassion means *doing something* and ideals meet the muck of everyday reality. Faculty may, for instance, feel righteous indignation for how a policy or procedure affects students, but the purpose of that policy or procedure may be to make staff people's work better and sometimes even be the difference between work that is manageable and work that is not. It may be compassionate and caring to advocate for a change of policy to support students, but if you are told that the policy is in place to make it possible for the work of staff to get done, the generous response is not, "Screw the staff. They work for us. It's their job."

It is easy for us as faculty to feel righteous on behalf of students, to feel unassailable when we decry the cruelties of the institution, but we must be careful that our commitment to a particular idea of education does not lead us toward the immiseration of people carrying out the work we do not see.

The most difficult year of teaching I ever experienced was one spent at a private high school that served a community to which I was an outsider. The school had just spent millions of dollars to build a new building, but this expenditure was at the far end of what they could really afford, and the result was that they needed every single student's tuition money if they were going to keep the lights on and the doors open. The school simply could not afford to lose students. The administration's approach to this was to remove all discipline from the school. No students got grades below an A- (the principal flat-out told me this after I was perplexed by multiple students bursting into tears at a B), no students got any real interventions when they behaved badly, never mind suspensions or expulsions. Students could get a stern talking-to for disruptive or belligerent behavior, but that was it, and they recognized such admonishments were empty. The sacred rule was: keep the students happy. This was ruinous, and it was especially ruinous for me,

a new faculty member who was not a part of the community, who then had to face classes of 20-30 adolescents every day who knew they could get away with anything short of physical assault. It was impossible to keep classes from devolving into chaos, and the effect was that nobody learned much of anything. That entire year was a waste of my and my students' time. Part of that was my fault for not having better classroom management skills, but the odds were also terribly stacked against me. Nonetheless, the students were happy, and that was all that mattered to the school. Indeed, a lot of the students clearly enjoyed tormenting me.

When I bristle against some of the looser ideologies of progressive education, against some of the tendencies that want to make students the center of everything, it is that experience that I flash back to, that misery I fear.

This fear, though, is also a product of a lack of resources. Caring costs. We *could* let students do whatever they want, however they want, if we had vastly more staff to absorb the effect of their doing whatever they want, however they want. Or we could give up on being an institution and instead become more of a place where people encounter each other, something like Summerhill.[3] Instead, we have at best a skeleton crew of staff plus federal, state, institutional, and accrediting-agency regulations to navigate, parents to appease, legislators to coddle, etc. Recognizing that sometimes people aren't being malicious, sometimes they're just trying to figure out how to make their jobs manageable within the limitations of an institution, is also generous thinking.

In an email I recently wrote to a few colleagues about a difficult situation for which there was simply no good solution, I talked about "the anger I feel at the university, at the university system, at the legislature, at the whole awful cultural moment we are in that has put such pain and despair into good people

[3] A.S. Neill, *Summerhill School: A New View of Childhood* (St. Martin's, 1996).

whose greatest crime is that they care about knowledge and learning and teaching (meanwhile, terrible people become billionaires). Again and again, I see great people leave public education, leave education altogether, be driven out of the work they sacrificed for and believed so deeply in. And I wonder how many times a heart can break."

In "The Strength of Kindness", I wrote about Thich Nhat Hanh and kindness even in war. After writing that essay, I read a book-length dialogue between Thich Nhat Hanh and the Jesuit priest and activist Daniel Berrigan, *The Raft Is Not the Shore*, first published in 1975.[4] (It includes a foreword by bell hooks, who died only a month before Nhat Hanh.) I like it more than most books about mindfulness or interfaith dialogue because the conversations in this book happened at something of a nadir for activism and hope, a time of great bitterness and frustration, so there is an edge to the conversation that you don't get in the many mindful/interfaith books that boil down to little more than recommendations to "pay attention to your breath" and "try to be nice". Such recommendations feel especially shallow when the whole world is falling apart around you.

Consider this, for instance, from Nhat Hanh in a discussion of power, leadership, and why so many good people become harmful leaders:

> When medical students and nurses are about to graduate, they think very much of helping the poor — those who have not enough money to go to fully equipped hospitals, facilities like that. But after graduation, after a few years in their careers, many of them begin to act like machines and pay no more attention to the poor and oppressed. The nurses become irritated at poor patients. The doctors

[4] Hạnh, Thich Nhat, and Daniel Berrigan. *The Raft Is Not the Shore: Conversations Toward a Buddhist-Christian Awareness*. 1975; Orbis Books, 2001.

> become insensitive to the sufferings of the poor. It's very sad. To love is a difficult thing when people try to cheat and trick you, to get the most out of you if you show compassion, goodwill; when they try to get the better of you because you show concern. So, at one point you cannot love them anymore, and you begin to treat them as you treat objects.
>
> I think such things happen frequently. Our goodwill, our intentions, play one role, social conditions play another. And there are the political and economic systems. If we try to do things faithfully, in accord with our best instincts, we have to go against all of these forces.
>
> If you are in power, they will try to bring you down. So, you make a compromise in order to be able to continue. You compromise to the point that you become like those whom you opposed before you came to power.[5]

How can we keep compassion going? How do we keep our hearts from petrifying with scar tissue?

If I had a clear answer to those questions, I would not struggle as much as I do.

When I feel that I have slipped away from generosity, toward apathy or even cruelty, when I feel the jagged edges of hard-heartedness cutting through my flesh, my own past experiences raising my defenses instead of extending my compassion, I try to steer myself back toward three verities: *primary values*, *community*, and *the present moment*.

Primary values are what I talked about in the "Five Values" essay. "Am I falling into useless or even harmful ways of thinking?" I might wonder. To judge, I return to those values.

[5] Hanh & Berrigan, 38.

(A recent answer: Yes, I am falling into harmful ways of thinking. The next question became: Why? The answer: Impatience, primarily. Frustration. Annoyance. At what? Interestingly, when I reflected on the source of my feelings, I realized it was frustration at not being able to get other people to see some of those values that matter to me, people who see more value in judgment and punishment than I do, and this frustration made me worry that I am too soft, wishy-washy, weak. Why, I wondered, did I worry about that? I realized then that I worried I might be vulnerable again to the kind of exploitation and abuse I felt that year at the school where there was no discipline. It was in almost every way an irrational fear, but it is the irrational fears that are the most powerful. Our defensive responses are so often an attempt to protect ourselves from past suffering. The past is not accessible, the future may feel like a threat, and so the present becomes unbearable. By knowing what my primary values are, though, I have something to turn to, some alternate path away from the irrational fear.)

Community is one of my five values, but instead of thinking about it in that context, where it is in relationship to the other four values, here I think about it within the context of a time of chaos. Within this context, what I mean is that community allows us to be both strong and weak, energized and exhausted, expansive and defensive. Why? Because community means we don't have to do it all on our own. A community that pays attention to itself *as* a community encourages some people to rest while others expend energy, and thus that community can absorb external chaos and strife for much longer than any individual. The community seeks placidity within itself, and that is its strength. Community homeostasis. Peace within to survive the chaos without. The environment around the community may be nuts, but the community itself lives by the rule of *from each according to their ability to each according to their need*. Today, I may have lots of ability and you may have lots of need; tomorrow, vice versa. A healthy community

is not about any one individual doing everything, it is not about heroes, or at least not about The Hero as an identity. There may be lots of heroes in a community, but in a healthy community, who those heroes are changes day by day and week by week.

Finally, perhaps the simplest, most challenging, and yet most important way of thinking that I try to return to when generosity feels difficult and chaos overwhelming: valuing **the present moment** over any other.

The past is irretrievable, the future inaccessible. All we ever actually have is the present. This concept is simple to say, but so challenging and so fruitful that it has vexed, beguiled, and inspired philosophies for millennia.

Herakleitos: "Everything flows; nothing remains. Everything moves; nothing is still. Everything passes away; nothing lasts."[6]

I have known people who live in their past, and though that has seldom been my own temptation, I once spent good chunks of life living for an imagined future. Everything I did was not for its own sake, but for the sake of preparing for a future I desired. "What's wrong with that?" you ask. In small doses, perhaps nothing. Indeed, it's probably better to prepare a bit than not at all. But if you do what I did through a lot of my early life, and see value only in what you imagine is to come, you will miss the value in the present. Nothing will ever be satisfying, nothing will ever be fulfilling, because everything will always be for tomorrow, not today. I have few regrets (regret sticks you in the past), but I do regret having lived this way. We live in an endless present; tomorrow is endlessly deferred.

Still, we must have concern for the future, even if we never live in it. A sense of deep time is just as vital as attention to the present moment. It's that old idea of being good ancestors. Perhaps we can find meaningful ways of living if use extremities of time to balance our concern: let yourself think of the deep

[6] Davenport, Guy, trans. *7 Greeks*. New Directions, 1995: 160.

past far, far before your life was ever conceived, then think of the immediate now, then think of the far, far future for which you are an ancestor. The most meaningful values will come from that vision.

In an essay I wrote in May 2020 titled "The Value of Uselessness" (another value I cherish!), I quoted a favorite performance by Utah Phillips, a performance of the classic song "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" with some fun stories spread through it. The story that I quoted there, and which is relevant here, is that of the neighbor, the "little retired banker fella". (It's best experienced in the recording, but I put the text in the essay.) Of course, that story is facetious, and the little banker's advice to work and save so that one day you might be free is a good one if you are concerned for future comfort. Still, I think the bum has more of a right idea than the banker. The pandemic has shown a lot of people that if you're always living for tomorrow and never for today, eventually — perhaps sooner than you expect — you will run out of tomorrows.

We must return to now, because *now* is all we really ever have. We are locked out of the past and future, trapped in a constant flow of present moments. That is the basic fact of existence.

This basic fact can help us because it allows a clearer perspective on what matters and what is noise. I have been thinking about it recently in relationship to teaching. One of the ills of contemporary education in the United States is that it is too much about preparation and not enough about living in the now. If the whole purpose of school is to prepare people for life *after* school, then consider how much human energy is wasted in schooling. The common expression of life after school as "the real world" is a symptom of this way of thinking.

It is no coincidence that there have been a lot of conversations about the value and purpose of schooling in the wake of the pandemic. A giant emergency that upended all our systems showed us that setting school up as nothing but preparation for

an unpredictable future is foolish. What about the many people who have, tragically, died before graduating? It's a morbid thought, but a useful one. If school's fundamental purpose is to prepare people for life after school, what then of the lives of people who did not get to have a life after school?

Here's another question I don't have a real answer to, but which perhaps is worth pondering: how might our pedagogy change if instead of prioritizing students' preparedness for the future we prioritized their having a meaningful experience now, here, today? Is there a way to design a pedagogy that is fulfilling now, rather than tomorrow — since tomorrow, who knows, humanity could be smothered by an infestation of giant capybaras from outer space who kill us all with cuteness.

That suggests a new sort of generous thinking. A generosity in the here and now that is also, simultaneously, a generosity *to the now*. Before we can offer preparation, before we can even do the good and noble work of trying to be good ancestors, we need to honor this moment.

This moment.

This moment.

This moment.

Now.

Perhaps a generosity toward the present moment could help us stay compassionate even as the world around us does everything it can to make compassion difficult.

At Thich Nhat Hanh's Plum Village, there is a beautiful chant, "Namo Avalokiteshvaraya".[7] It is just those two words repeated. Avalokiteshvaraya is the bodhisattva embodying compassion. As Nhat Hanh explained in a dharma talk:

[7] It can be heard at
https://plumvillage.org/library/chants/namo-avalokiteshvaraya

> When the monastics chant the name Avalokitesvara for the first time, they go back to themselves and try to touch the suffering inside of them.
>
> When they sing and chant the name for the second time, they become aware of the suffering of the people around them.
>
> And when they sing and chant it for the third time, they get in touch with the suffering in the world.[8]

The chant doesn't last for just three times, though. It lasts (beautifully!) for over twenty minutes (in the versions I'm familiar with). This is a good reminder that compassion is difficult. It requires real attention and real intention. Real practice. It doesn't just happen, even for monks who have devoted their lives to it. The world of suffering resists compassion in every possible way. We will fail at compassion again and again and again. That is to be expected. Paradoxically, compassion for ourselves requires that we recognize and accept the many times our compassion will fall short. It does not, though, mean that we cannot be compassionate now, in this new moment.

The past is gone.

The future is not yet here.

There is only now.

And now we can have compassion. Now we can be generous.

And now.

And now.

—April 2022

[8] https://plumvillage.app/listening-to-namo-avalokiteshvara/

Known, Needed, Cared For

When I was a high school teacher, we had a leader who told us that a successful institution is one where everybody in the community feels known, needed, and cared for. It's a simple concept that, if taken seriously, has revolutionary potential. Indeed, it is one of the most powerful ideas I've ever encountered in education.

I remember that when I first heard this idea, I didn't like it. "Sentimental drivel!" I wanted to scream. "Simplistic feel-good blather!" But then I thought back to my experience as an undergraduate.

I spent three years at New York University, studying playwrighting. I left after my junior year for various reasons — personal, financial, programmatic — but fundamentally I left NYU because though I felt somewhat known within my own department, I did not feel the least bit needed nor the least bit cared for. ("Cared for" in the sense of people really caring that I'm there, caring about my welfare, caring about my work.) When I told people I was leaving, nobody tried to stop me — except for one teacher, the last one I told, and the only one I'd ever had much contact with outside the classroom. She seemed devastated and was angry that the university hadn't made any sort of effort to keep me. But it was too late.

I transferred to the University of New Hampshire for my senior year. It was a hard year. My parents had recently divorced, I had decided I didn't want to be a professional playwright, and I felt like a failure for leaving NYU. Though I didn't miss the cost of living in New York, I missed the

liveliness of the city, missed feeling like I lived at the center of the world.

I was only at UNH for one year as an undergraduate (plus a summer course and a trip to Mexico to finish my foreign-language credit), but during that year I worked as a TA for one of my teachers (in an environmental science course that I took just because it was a requirement, and which deeply influenced my life then and now), I took a seminar that directly led to my Ph.D. dissertation over a decade later, I met another teacher who would quickly become one of my best friends and most consistent mentors, and I've contributed to a scholarship fund in memory of another of my teachers that year because he taught me how to read 17th and 18th century literature, a gift I continue to cherish. All of that — and more! — in a single academic year.

Known. Needed. Cared for.

In my current role, people often ask me the secret of our success with retention, because not only do about two thirds of our students say that our program is what kept them from dropping out of college, but we also have one of the highest retention rates in the university. At a small school in a state with high education costs and doom-and-gloom demographics, that's a big deal. What's our secret? people ask.

I'm new in the job and can not claim any credit for any of it; I see what's happening, and I try to analyze how I can best support and continue it. It's no surprise to me that this program keeps students in school and gets them graduated. We could talk about our systems and ideas for hours, but if you really want to know them, it's all in the four words: Known, needed, cared for.

Here's one example of what I'm thinking about, a relatively little thing that allows us to convey our ethos to the students — even with over 100 majors and only two faculty (one, me, on a one-year contract; the other on sabbatical at the moment) and

one program support assistant. The example is this: The drop-in nature of our office.

We put our office hours on our syllabi — not our "office hours" when we, the faculty, will be sitting in our office waiting for someone (anyone!) to come by, but the actual hours that our program office is open. (I do have my own official office hours on my syllabi, but also add "or by appointment or chance".) Our program assistant is fully trained as an advisor, and our student workers are trained in basic program-level advising. Everyone can also help with all the major assignments for our courses. We have deliberately created an office that is not only capable of doing the necessary administrative tasks, but which is capable of providing various levels of support to students who walk in.

Again and again, we tell students: "If the office is open, drop in and get your questions answered." We'll help with assignments, with answering general questions about the school, with specific questions about our own program; we'll help them sign up for classes and brainstorm what classes to take; we'll direct them to the people who can help with things we can't. We're open 8.30am-4pm most days during the school year and, thanks to student workers, till 9pm one day and 10pm another. No need for an appointment unless you need to make sure to see somebody specific when you arrive (or you can't wait five or ten minutes if everyone is busy).

A commitment to being available to students who drop in isn't just about convenience for them, it's also about communicating a vision.

A lot of institutional customs and cultures push against a feeling of openness in a program. Universities can be alienating, forbidding places. We are vigilant in telling students about our system. "Drop in," we say. Again and again. They don't believe us at first. They are used to offices being places where they should be scared to enter because they might interrupt somebody's work. But they *are* our work. Yes, we've got all sorts of

stuff to do, but the students have to come first, or else why bother?

We have other systems and resources designed to make our program truly student-centered, and Robin DeRosa has outlined them well in her blog post "Open Pedagogy at the Program Level", which includes the voices of students.[1]

None of this is magic and none of it is foolproof, but it is based on that simple premise of making everyone, and our students in particular, see that they are known, needed, and cared for.

Can the concept apply to the classroom as well? It needs to.

I've just been reading *The Spark of Learning* by Sarah Rose Cavanagh, and was struck by her description of the findings of Daniel F. Chambliss and Christopher G. Takacs in their book *How College Works*, which studied students at one college over ten years:

> Among the many fascinating specific findings they share in their book *How College Works*, one solid theme emerged: what makes a successful college isn't the number of Nobel Prize winners at the front of classrooms or how many new science buildings are built on campus. Rather, it is the people. The best predictors of student satisfaction and success are whether students form close-knit friendships, have a mentor or two on campus with whom they develop a close relationship (it doesn't need to be a professor), or find a meaningful social group with which to identify.[2]

Cavanagh stresses the importance of social relationships to people's success, and especially to students' success in college.

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[1] https://robinderosa.net/uncategorized/open-pedagogy-at-the-program-level-the-plymouthids-case-study/

[2] Cavanagh, *Spark of Learning*, 51.

That's why the *known, needed, cared for* formula works so well: it highlights the feelings that good social relationships produce.

In the classroom, the formula reminds us that we should try to shape our interactions with students in a way that lets them know we care that they are in the room with us. In college teaching especially, it can be easy for the teacher to think of the students as interchangeable widgets. They come, they go. They do the work or they don't. We grade them and then next term a new batch of widgets arrives. I've felt this sometimes myself, especially when busy. (Inevitably, if I'm feeling that way about a class, the class goes badly. Which is *not* to say a class always goes well if I'm thinking of the students as individual human beings whose presence I value — sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't — but that I *know* everything will go badly if I don't think of them as individuals and if I don't work to value their presence.)

How we set up the work in our courses also contributes to students feeling known, needed, and cared for — or not. At a pedagogical level, to me this comes down to the difference between the production of knowledge and the transferal of knowledge. Paulo Freire puts it clearly in *Pedagogy of Freedom*, where he writes that "to know how to teach is to create possibilities for the construction and production of knowledge rather than to be engaged simply in a game of transferring knowledge. When I enter a classroom I should be someone who is open to new ideas, open to questions, and open to the curiosities of the students as well as their inhibitions".[3] For the construction and production of knowledge, students can't be seen as widgets. The game of transferring knowledge is a one-way track where the all-knowing teacher delivers information to the ignorant student. In such classrooms, all ignorant students are effectively equally empty vessels, at least until the

[3] Freire, *Pedagogy of Freedom*, 49.

first exam. Equally empty vessels are interchangeable, and one of the benefits of thinking about how students can be known, needed, and cared for is that it encourages us toward thinking of our students as human beings capable of constructing and producing knowledge. The task of the teacher is to treat them as such, and to create a learning environment that encourages everyone within that environment to feel themselves to be known, needed, and cared for. There is no simple recipe for this, and it is likely to be different in each classroom and with each teacher. (I've known teachers who can do this even when lecturing — the environmental science teacher I mentioned above was one of them. That was a 300-student lecture course. It was magic.) There is no recipe, but in the absence of a recipe we have intention and reflection.

I *intend* at all times to be a teacher who creates an environment in which students can feel known, needed, and cared for. We all know, though, that intentions go awry. The best intentions often get compromised — even obliterated — in the crucible of everyday work and life. Nor do intentions guarantee good results. More often than not, I've probably failed to create the kind of environment I aimed for.

Thus, reflection. Which is why I'm writing this right now. Reflection isn't just analysis, though it is that; reflection is also reminding. Reminding myself of what my best goals are. Reminding myself, here in the thick of it, that I have goals beyond just getting through tonight's class, and that those goals should inform how I approach tonight's class…

— September 2018

Change or Die

My first job out of college was at a small boarding school that I had myself attended for four years as a day student. This was not a Famous Boarding School or something out of Harry Potter; it was a school constantly teetering on the edge of bankruptcy. In my junior year, we got a new headmaster, Jeffrey Pratt Beedy, a visionary guy who'd never been a headmaster before, but who had an Ed.D. from Harvard and wanted to change how education works. I liked his vision, but during my student years, he was just learning his way around.

I returned to teach at the school because all the other jobs I'd been able to find were internships, and I needed to make more money than I would in an internship because I had student loans to pay, so, since my own school knew me and was willing to hire me if I was willing to take a very low salary (but enough to pay my monthly bills), I ended up back at a place I'd sworn I would never return to. I said I'd stay maybe a year, at most three.

By that point, Jeff Beedy had been able to build a faculty who (mostly) agreed with his general vision, a vision built on a premise that education should be flexible, it should be truly student-centered, it should be open to experiment, and it should empower every member of the community — that means the maintenance and housekeeping staff, too, not just the faculty and students. (One day, he gave me a copy of *Summerhill* by A.S. Neill and said, "We could never do this exactly, but wouldn't it be fun to try?")

When I began as a teacher, the school was in better financial shape than when I had been a student, but that wasn't saying much. We still had to take almost any student who could afford tuition, because tuition covered something like 90% of the school's operating costs. This made for a motley student body — not just interesting, quirky students, of which there were many, but also some students who for various reasons couldn't get accepted into any other boarding school. We also had a program for students with language-based learning disabilities, and that led ultimately to about 1/3 of our student body being those students, all of whom had at least one mainstream class. Though our courses were, for the most part, broken into tracks ("paced", regular, honors, AP), the school was committed to fluidity of tracking: nobody should ever get stuck in a track. In the vision, there should not be "honors students" and "paced students", but rather the courses you take should be whatever is best for your own learning within that discipline — there was no reason someone couldn't be in the lowest-level math course and the highest-level English course, for instance. This did not always work out in practice (usually for scheduling reasons), but we got pretty good at building it into our assumptions for how to work with students, and as a teacher I soon learned that no matter what level my course was officially, in practice it would be a pretty heterogeneous group. Even my Advanced Placement classes were — we had no entry requirements, so any student who wanted to be in AP could be. (One of my best AP Literature students was so dyslexic that she hadn't learned to read until she was 13.)

I'd told the dean who hired me that I would maybe stay three years, five at the absolute most. I stayed nine.

A few years into my time as a teacher at this school, Jeff and some of the other administrators decided that we should put creativity at the center of what we were doing. He hired a brilliant woman with a Ph.D. in neuropsychology to turn the "Learning Center" (for kids with learning disabilities) into a

"Center for Creative Intelligence" that would serve the entire campus and move us away from separating out the students coded with learning disabilities. We wanted to create a truly mainstreamed environment, one where nobody was stigmatized as disabled and every student was helped to find their own best way of learning. I was part of a delegation that traveled to Yale to talk with researchers there and then to visit the College of Creative Studies at UC Santa Barbara.

I could go on and on. Just dipping into these memories is exciting. By the end of this time, we had found, I thought, exactly the sorts of students who best fit with what we could offer. We'd won awards, gotten grants, financially stabilized the school, increased financial aid, and very importantly we'd become a first-choice school for the majority of our students. They didn't come to us because they couldn't get in elsewhere; they came to us because they wanted what we offered.

As a teacher, I've never been happier or felt more useful

It didn't last. My life changed, various leaders at the school left and the board replaced them with people with a different vision, the culture itself changed. The school is still doing well, and vestiges of the old vision remain, but I experienced about three years when it was, I'm convinced, one of the most vital and exciting educational institutions in the country, so the more careful and sedate place it has become is impressive but not as exciting. I feel lucky to have had those miracle years, though, because they shaped me at the core.

During meetings this week at the university where I am now working, I felt that old energy of chaos, possibility, and vision. I lived through *change or die* before, and it was invigorating, even as it was frustrating, bewildering, exhausting, terrifying. It led to miracles.

Of course, we hope we don't always have to live and work under chaos, on matter how productive. We hope that we can use the energy and vision now to establish structures that will create at least a bit of equilibrium.

But there is no absolute equilibrium. When I was young, a book that blew my mind open was Daniel Botkin's *Discordant Harmonies*, and its vision of nature as always in flux is one that I've held onto and transferred to many realms. There's something Zen to it, something Heraclitean: everything is change. Life is change, and so *change or die* is a simple statement of fact. *To live is to change.*

I like what the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* says of Heraclitus's famous fragment about not being able to step into the same river twice:

> …the message … is not that all things are changing so that we cannot encounter them twice, but something much more subtle and profound. It is that some things stay the same only by changing. One kind of long-lasting material reality exists by virtue of constant turnover in its constituent matter. Here constancy and change are not opposed but inextricably connected.[1]

This ought to be our vision of education and of institutions.

I've sometimes told people that I keep working as a teacher because maybe one day I'll get it right. But that's not quite true. I keep working as a teacher because I know I'll never get it right, because there is no "getting it right" as a finish line, there is no finish line. There is only process, and the process is life, and life is change.

What ought to remain at least somewhat stable are values. This is why I keep thinking ethics is as important as pedagogy. If your ethics are clear, then you'll find pedagogies that are at least adequate to whatever changing situations you're part of. That is how we survived at the boarding school where I first worked, where we often didn't know what we were doing, where our experiments blew up in our face as often as they produced wondrous results — we knew what our values were, what

[1] https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/#Flu

our vision was. We wanted everybody, not just students, to feel empowered and engaged with the work. We wanted to see each other as human beings, to revel in the messiness of being human, to promote kindness and forgiveness more than competitiveness and contempt, to find the joy in a shared endeavor. We wanted to experiment, knowing full well that most experiments fail, but that the point of any experiment is to learn from it. We wanted to embrace everybody's quirkiness, to celebrate rather than rue the undeniable fact that we were, in the words of one of my best friends, a school on the Island of Misfit Toys.

Thinking back now, I wonder: What didn't we understand? What didn't we do well enough? How did we fail to create something more lasting?

Lots of reasons, and no single one explains it all. The administration had priorities other than doing intensive fundraising and building a massive endowment, which ultimately caused the board of trustees to grow impatient with experiments. Even during the best years, and despite remarkable progress, there remained some vestiges of an athletic culture that was hypercompetitive and hypermasculine. There wasn't enough attention to fairness in assigning faculty responsibilities and avoiding the appearance of favoritism in remuneration. (It would have annoyed the administration, but we would have benefitted from something like a union that created a meaningful employment contract rather than a vague letter of agreement. Job descriptions became a major point of contention and led to personal animosities that were unfortunate and unnecessary.) The downside of empowering students and faculty to try to create whatever they could imagine is that when, inevitably, there aren't enough resources or time for everybody's dream projects, people can feel unsupported or disillusioned. We didn't support women in administration or faculty enough — there were places where and times when a bro-ish culture made the school unappealing to women, so they went elsewhere. (There were also times when we did an excellent job

of developing something like equality of opportunity in a place that had never had it — we made a concerted effort to shape the school in a way that would attract more female students, for instance, and succeeded at that. We broke through a virulently heterosexist culture to the point where we provided life-saving support and success to queer students, even as homophobia persisted in some corners. These things aren't either/or. Old habits and old structures can still shadow new awareness, the best intentions, and real success.)

There were likely other obstacles I'm not aware of, or have forgotten. We built a beautiful (though admittedly sometimes awkward) sandcastle, and it washed away. A new headmaster turned out to be almost the diametrical opposite of Jeff, which I'm not sure was quite the board's intention when they hired him, but that's how it worked out. And he did great things in his own way, too — he expanded the endowment, for instance, by orders of magnitude. But it soon stopped being the school that made teaching, for me, seem like the most important and energizing career in the world, and I soon left.

I'm still in contact with quite a few of my students from those years. They've gone off to a lot of success — sometimes financial success in fields they love, but also, and more importantly, success as parents and friends and people and, in quite a few cases, as teachers.

I had dinner with one of those students last week, someone I hadn't seen in person in many years. He's done extraordinary things. We reminisced about the school. "A crazy place," he said. "I can't believe we got to do all the things we got to do. It was bizarre. And great."

It *was* bizarre. And great.

(I think of a favorite Tori Amos song: *We held gold dust in our hands*.)

Life is change. Change or die.

—August 2018

Afterword (2026)

It's hard to read this now, with all its excitement for my new job at Plymouth State University, because what happened to me at my first job happened in more brutal and ultimately painful ways at PSU. That's a story that will be mentioned in later chapters. But it has reiterated for me how impermanent our institutions are, and how dangerous it is to get attached to anything beyond the present moment. Still, I wanted this piece to be in this book because it does capture some of the wonder of those early years, those precious years when a bunch of us, against all odds, did some weirdly great things together.

The next chapter brings the story of my mentor Jeff Beedy to a close.

He Gave Us Each Other: In Memory of Jeffrey Pratt Beedy

In the summer of 2023, I gathered with friends, colleagues, acquaintances, former students, former teachers, and former staff members at the New Hampton School, the high school I graduated from in 1994 and then returned to for my first job after college, a job I planned to stay at for a year or two and ended up staying for almost a decade. Most of the reason why I stayed at New Hampton was a man named Jeffrey Pratt Beedy, Ed.D. — known almost universally as Jeff or, even more commonly, Beeds. Jeff was also the reason I returned that summer, because I had been asked by his family to speak at a memorial celebration of his life.

I attended New Hampton as a day student on a scholarship. Having grown up in the area, a lot of my friends were faculty kids, and so I knew the campus and the people. I ached to study with some of the English and history teachers I knew about there, to immerse myself in subjects too esoteric for my public school (e.g. Latin), to be part of an intensive theatre program. The first couple years were hard because the school was not in great financial shape. When Jeff became headmaster of New Hampton for my junior and senior years, the financial challenges had reached a level of impending catastrophe. As the new headmaster, he was tasked by the board of trustees with slashing costs, including salaries and many positions.

Almost everyone who made me excited to attend New Hampton lost their job the summer that Jeff arrived. I looked into going back to public school. I hated this new guy who had,

in my eyes, destroyed the place that had in so many ways given me hope in learning. And then he invited me in to chat about the changes — and to help him pick up the pieces and do whatever we could do to make it a better place, a true community. He never tried to pretend the situation was anything other than what it was: dire and regrettable. But he also needed us, all of us, to believe it might get better, and to work hard to make it so.

Jeff had a remarkable ability to see you not only for who you were but who you could be. He could listen, truly listen. He figured me out even when I couldn't figure myself out. He knew books were the way to my heart, so while I was trying to decide whether I could trust him, he gave me Theodore Sizer's book *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*. Later, he handed me A.S. Neill's *Summerhill*. He encouraged me to advocate for myself, to find my own way through the structures of school, to seek passions and new experiences, to take risks. And he did this for countless other people as well.

When I returned to New Hampton as a teacher, I got to play around with a lot of these ideas and possibilities. It was often messy work — sometimes it felt like everybody on campus was director of their own program and hardly anybody was maintaining anything. I remember endless schedule conflicts, organizational frustrations, chaos. And, amidst it all, magic. The magic of community. I wouldn't ever recommend creating some of the chaos we created, but having to work through that chaos together solidified bonds between faculty, staff, and students that last to this day. Jeff had a marvelous talent for creating and encouraging community. He brought people together in a way I've never seen from anyone else. Sometimes utterly whimsically. Numerous people can testify to the fact that they ended up as a student or staff member at New Hampton entirely because they happened to encounter Jeff Beedy somewhere, he saw possibility in them, and he convinced them

to come to rural New Hampshire to be a student at a boarding school or, even more remarkably, to take a job where they would be paid barely anything while working as hard as they ever worked in their lives. (I've never been so exhausted as in my first three or four years as a teacher at New Hampton.)

In the early 2000s, when I was a young teacher at the school, Jeff called me to his office for a chat, saying he had a project to propose. What he proposed was that we write a book together. He had a title and a concept: a kind of allegorical novel about adolescents who made a successful community for themselves on a remote island. Kind of a reverse *Lord of the Flies*. It would be a story told from the point of view of a school headmaster who was having a mid-life crisis, a sense of his career not meaning anything. He would somehow get to the island and learn from the adolescents. It would be called *Dancin' with the Natives*, because he loved the idea of the adolescents as having a kind of native knowledge of their own world and needs, and dancing is a beautiful mix of two of his favorite things: music and physical movement. What did I think? Could I write that?

I liked the challenge, so I said yes. Jeff offered me a fair fee for the work, and my assumption was that I would basically write a draft from his outline and notes, then he would revise the draft to whatever he wanted it to be. I wrote quickly, trying to give shape to the various ideas he gave me. We had fun talking about it all, learning from each other, but I was clear with him: this was *his* book. He could do with it what he wanted, and I didn't expect my name to be on it. He was fine with that. I finished the draft, he liked it, and then he found a way to publish it. The first edition was called *Dancin' with the Natives* and it had both our names on it. I never loved the folksy *dancin'* and have always been a bit uncomfortable with the idea of *natives*, but it was Jeff's book and he loved it. Once I got my Ph.D., he was really proud of me, and republished the book himself as *Dancing with the Natives*, with the short forms of

both our names (Jeff and Matt), plus his Ed.D. and my Ph.D. Though I still think of it as Jeff's book, and don't include it on my CV or bibliography, it's work I'm terribly proud of, because for all its awkwardness (and it definitely has more than a little awkwardness in the writing), it honestly represents what we both believed when we wrote it, and it was a joyful collaboration.

Nowadays, running a program for students to create their own college majors, I think of Jeff every day at work. He would have hated all the bureaucracy I have to negotiate in my university life, but I talked with him about the job shortly before his death, and he loved that a big part of my work is helping students discover and shape the education they need. The community is very different than the one we shared, but the work of trusting students, empowering students, and helping students through the mess of living, learning, and working together is the same.

Here is what I said to celebrate Jeff's life:

Remarks in Celebration of Jeffrey Pratt Beedy McEvoy Theatre, New Hampton School, 4 June 2023

I first met Jeff Beedy in this very building. He was a finalist for the headmaster job and I was one of the students asked to have lunch with him on the day of his interviews. It was in the Moody Room, which is now, I think, the Dean of Students' office, but then it was a rather dark conference room. We both got there early. I was awkward and geeky, even more than I am now, and Jeff put me at ease, asking questions about the school, about me, about whether he should take the job if it was

offered to him. Later, he would tell people I was the first student he met here, but I don't think that was true, and I wouldn't be surprised if he said the same thing about a bunch of people. He liked to make us feel special, and we did feel special, and though sometimes he may have told us things that weren't technically true, they were true in spirit. We thrived on that spirit. Many times, he believed in me far more than I believed in myself. A lot of us here today can say that. Indeed, it's one of the primary reasons we are here. To pay honor to a man who believed in us.

A group of us were talking about him after we learned that he had died. Someone said, "He gave us each other." That's true. So many of my friends through the years are people I met because of Jeff Beedy, either directly or indirectly. He encouraged us to get to know each other even if it didn't seem obvious why we should. That my best friend to this day was a varsity football player here is a friendship achieved because Jeff insisted that the borders we had built between, for instance, arts and athletics were harmful, and that overcoming that harm required doing the work of breaking through the borders. He charged us to do that work as a school community. With our fair share of grumbles and curses, we tried to live up to his vision, failing plenty of times, but succeeding often enough that lives were changed forever.

The day the news of Jeff's death made its way through our networks, I had to leave work because I was too distracted by all the stories we were all telling. Decades of fun and frustration, joy and sorrow, inspiration and compassion. It got exhausting, going from tears to laughter to tears to laughter. A good exhausting, though. An exhaustion filled with gratitude and love. And that gratitude and love made their way literally around the world. From New Hampshire to New Mexico, Canada to Cameroon. The sense of connection was more profound than I have felt in a long time, and what was it that connected us, that connects us still? Jeff Beedy.

It's really hard to explain Jeff to people who didn't know him. In the past, when I wanted new colleagues and friends to know what a colossal figure he was in my life, I would explain he was my friend, but *friend* was never quite the right word, even though it's certainly accurate. Now when I need to quickly explain my relationship to him, I say friend and mentor. The mentor part is vitally important. Jeff was my headmaster, and then he gave me my first job out of college and became my boss. But he was also a guy I could talk to about pretty much anything, and who had sometimes scary insight into what was really going on. He was a guy who gave me books and talked to me about music, a guy I actually wrote a book with myself and a guy who took a whole bunch of us to a Bob Dylan concert just a couple months after 9/11, the first time I remember feeling human again after that awful September day in 2001.

And, as much as anyone, Jeff was someone who encouraged me to trust students and to trust the messy process of education — in fact, to see the messy part as the part that really matters.

When I think of Jeff, I don't think only of someone I enjoyed hanging out with, talking with. There is that, but more than that, I think about all I learned from him. I have spent twenty-five years of my life now as a teacher, and I don't think that would have happened without Jeff. Not just because he was so determined to get me back to New Hampton to teach, but because he sparked a passion in me by giving me — and all of us — a vision of education as being about people. Not theories, not rules, not abstractions. People. He directly challenged me to see that the best teaching isn't about having the best students, it's about being the best teacher for the students you have. Recognizing that the difficult situations are the most important ones. That was hard to learn, but important. And it led to everything else I hold onto now as the lessons Jeff Beedy gave me, gave all of us.

Jeff taught us that a healthy community is one where everybody feels known, needed, and cared for. Faculty, staff, students, all of us. Known, needed, and cared for. When he got to New Hampton, the school was in a dire financial situation, and Jeff had to make some truly painful staff cuts. I really got to know him because of that, because I marched into his office the summer between my sophomore and junior years to protest to him that in letting some beloved faculty go he was ruining our school. I still disagree with some of what he felt he had to do that summer, but I also know his side of it, because he was very honest about the challenges he faced. His office was always open to me and my friends that summer as we tried to understand what was happening. He told us he knew the situation sucked — I think those were his exact words, *this situation sucks* — and he asked us to help him make the school the best place we could make it be together. Together.

Known, needed, cared for. Those were the words he repeated again and again. He saw the lack, he felt it to his bones in that summer when he was a brand new headmaster. He knew where we had to get to not only if the school was to survive, but if it was to deserve to survive. The institution may have all sorts of failures and deficiencies, but it doesn't require money or superstar talent to strive for that vision of community — that ideal of everyone being known, needed, and cared for — it just requires a commitment to the basic values themselves.

Jeff taught us to practice compassion so that it becomes a habit, something like muscle memory in a muscle strengthened by regular workouts. The times that most benefit from compassion are also sometimes the hardest to open your heart to. But those are the times when compassion matters the most, those times when our first impulse is to close our hearts, to put up our armor, to reject what feels too difficult. Jeff knew this impulse and he knew how important it is for a community to

work against it, to cultivate the openness and acceptance necessary for education, the strength to meet someone not where you want them to be but where they are. He knew this not only as someone capable of extraordinary compassion — which I saw during some tragedies here, times of great loss — but also as someone who needed compassion and forgiveness himself. Jeff was a complex, contradictory, flawed man. He knew that. He would be the first to tell you how imperfect he was. Like many great leaders, though, he let this be a guide for what he led us toward. Jeff needed a community that could accommodate imperfection, understand mistakes, and help people live beyond their worst moments.

That is what I hold onto now. I think of it as Jeff's challenge to us. To go forth as imperfect people in an imperfect world, and to do whatever we can to help each other across our imperfections. To recognize the best in each other, even — especially — at the worst times. We don't have Jeff here to do that for us anymore. The work is ours now. He taught us what to do.

We must continue to believe in us.

—June 2023

Two

When Students Have Power by Ira Schor

Published almost 25 years ago, Ira Shor's *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy* is a book full of practical ideas that will still be of interest to teachers today. Indeed, it's depressing how relevant is remains. But this is also no surprise. On the second page of the book (in the preface), Shor writes:

> John Dewey, the patron saint of American education, so honored, invoked, and ignored, impatiently asked eighty years ago, "Why is it, in spite of the fact that teaching by pouring in, learning by a passive absorption, are universally condemned, that they are still entrenched in practice?" (*Democracy and Education* p. 38). His word "still" echoes loudly to me, speaking of his deep frustration in 1916 (when the book was published and schooling was relatively new in society), a frustration over the teacher-talk, one-way transmission of knowledge, and undemocratic relations dominating education. … How would Dewey feel today, if he could witness undemocratic authority and teacher-centered practice still entrenched from kindergarten through high school and on to graduate school?[1]

Dewey's spirit is a guiding force through this book, as is the spirit of Paulo Freire, with whose work Shor is forever linked:

[1] Shor, *When Students Have Power*, x-xi.

they collaborated on *A Pedagogy for Liberation* and Shor wrote the 1987 book *Freire for the Classroom*. One of the things *When Students Have Power* makes abundantly clear, though, is just how difficult it is not only to implement Deweyian and Freirean ideas in the American college classroom, but how hard it is even to think beyond the given circumstances and systems of American higher education.

I began reading *When Students Have Power* expecting a more radical approach than it delivered, and was frequently shocked that Shor seemed, at least in his presentation of himself in this book, to come to important realizations quite late — not just late in his career overall, but quite a few years after he had worked with Freire. The Shor character in the book comes off as someone deeply attached to the authoritarian power of the teacher, as someone whose entire sense of self is based in that authoritarian power, and yet who is aware enough of anti-authoritarian critiques to want to do better. The narrating Shor shows himself throughout the book progressing, but even where he gets to in the end is, to my eyes, weirdly restrained, even bureaucratic. I'm sure a lot of it has to do with the era and, even more so, with the particular institution Shor worked for, but I couldn't help thinking again and again as I read: "Wow, dude. Just let go." If ever there was somebody who needed to learn about ungrading, it's Ira Shor as he presents himself in this book.

When Students Have Power tells a story while also adding a lot of rather drawn-out theorizing. Whether that theorizing feels turgid, as it did to me, or is of interest probably depends on how much you've read about critical pedagogy and how interested you are in the kind of political perspective Shor comes from. In my case, because I've spent a long time reading a lot about critical pedagogy, and because my political values are similar enough to Shor's that his arguments are highly familiar to me, I really wanted to cut about 50 pages from the book's

total. If I had been his editor, I would have recommended focusing on the story he tells of one particular class, because most everything he wants to preach about is clear from that story. However, the turgid philosophizing is endemic to the kind of person Shor presents himself as in the book: someone who loves the sound of his own voice, is confident in his own opinions, and thinks he's more enlightened than other people. To his credit, Shor often critiques these tendencies in himself, and that gives a kind of character arc to the story … but, again, the story itself is strong enough and meaningful enough to carry the weight of the ideas.

And it is the story wherein the real value of *When Students Have Power* lies. The book chronicles one section of one course during one semester at the College of Staten Island (CSI) in the early 1990s. The course is a humanities elective with the theme of "Utopia", and it is held in a depressing cinderblock room in the basement of an old building. At the time, CSI was a commuter school serving more than twice as many students as it had been built for, and Shor had 35 students crammed into his classroom. The students were mostly working class, mostly white, mostly from conservative families.

Shor, committed to progressive ideas of education, decides to make the class partly about the experience of schooling itself. After all, it's a course about utopia, so why not get utopian with one of the institutions students know well. Because of his commitments, Shor enters the class with ideas about giving students at least a bit of choice about how things will proceed, and he seeks to challenge the assumptions and ignorance that he believes they bring to the classroom. He starts out by addressing the idea of what he calls the "Siberian Syndrome": the tendency of students to try to sit as far away from the teacher as possible. Throughout the book, he shows much concern for "the Siberians", wondering how to bring them into more active participation, how to break through the distance between them

and him, how to enlighten them. While he has some good understanding of what makes students keep distance from a teacher, and does a good job of seeing passivity and resistance as symptoms more than sins, he nonetheless comes off, to me at least, as both naive and hubristic. He'll sit among them out there in Siberia, and then they'll be chums! It's cringe-inducing to read. (Again, narrator-Shor fully realizes what character-Shor is slow to come to, and cringes along with us, perhaps, though I think he's less aware of the hubris than the naivety.)

What happens is that the students end up showing Shor just how attached he is to the idea of authority and they demand that if he's going to live up to his utopian ideals, he needs to turn much more of the course over to them.

Here, I expected something really radical, but it is the book's unradicalness that made it both frustrating and fascinating for me, often simultaneously. You'll find far more radical ideas in Cathy Davidson's *The New Education* than you will in *When Students Have Power*, and I don't think that's only a consequence of how society and education have changed in the decades between the books (though that is definitely a factor). It is also a consequence of Shor coming off as something of a control freak, even as he's a staunch advocate of progressive education.

Frustrating as Shor's control freakery can be as we read about it, it ends up being one of the real values of the book, because most teachers have at least a few similar tendencies. As much as we may say we trust students, as much as we may want to think that democracy and education ought to be united, as much as we seek to encourage collaboration and autonomy … it's hard to let go of the power and prestige that teacherly authority provides. After all, we don't have much else. In a society that doesn't pay teachers well, doesn't respect them, and often presents them as failures, frauds, and freaks … it is no surprise that we cling to whatever authority we can conjure.

And authority is not a bad thing. *Authority* and *authoritarianism* don't have to be synonymous, as Shor and plenty of others have shown. But authority and authoritarianism can become indistinguishable if we do not pay careful attention, if we do not deliberately set up ways to undermine the authoritarianism lurking in our authority. What *When Students Have Power* shows is a process of interrogating that authority and weeding out the authoritarianism.

Working alongside his students, Shor comes up with systems for conversation about the course and its contents. The big eureka innovation of the course is to have a kind of governing council of students that meets with him after each class session and gets credit in the course for that work. This forces Shor to interrogate his teaching in a way he presents himself as never having done before. (Again, very weird for someone so devoted to critical pedagogy to be presenting this as a giant innovation, but good for the book's sense of drama. Shor comes off as someone who, in 20 years of teaching, never actually listened to a student before, and when he has to listen to these students, he faces a deep sense of crisis.)

The content of the utopia course is the most dated thing about this book. He assigns *Walden Two* and *Ecotopia*. The students hate *Walden Two*, which is no surprise — it's a godawful boring book, and I'm shocked to see from the Open Syllabus Project that it's still pretty popular among college teachers (though, interestingly, mostly with psychology classes more than literature, which is perhaps good, since there's plenty of better literature out there).[2] *Ecotopia* is more popular with the students (and also still assigned by teachers),[3] but with the huge popularity of dystopian and utopian stories in popular culture, we might assume that the study of utopian ideas and literatures in college has progressed. (Alas, from the evidence

[2] See https://analytics.opensyllabus.org/singleton/works?id=335007569914

[3] Indeed, almost as often as *Walden Two*:
https://analytics.opensyllabus.org/singleton/works?id=893353237783

of the syllabi collected by the Society for Utopian Studies, this is not the case.[4] It's not just the dustiness of so many of the course readings but the persistent lack of innovative teaching. Unlike Shor, most teachers of courses on utopia seem to assume that the systems of schooling are, if not utopian, at least okay for now. John Dewey remains a radical.) In one of the weird lacunae in his self-awareness, Shor had apparently never, in 20 years of teaching and after all that time studying critical pedagogy, given his students any choice in course readings, and presents himself as surprised and shocked and disturbed at the idea of doing so, even though he sees how necessary it is to his ideology. Though this is an odd revelation for someone to come to after such a long time thinking about democratic approaches to education, it is understandable, because course readings are one of the places where we as teachers hold our authority most sacred. Shor comes up with a good system for students to investigate and choose texts for later classes only briefly mentioned in the book, but his reluctance to give away *any* of that power is both telling and something most teachers will sympathize with, especially English teachers.

Shor recognizes grading to be one of the most insidious and cruel tools of authoritarian teachers, and he ends up embracing a contract grading system inspired by Peter Elbow. I like and have used a kind of loose contract grading myself, but I was struck by Shor's approach: He begins by treating the grading contract as, indeed, a kind of contract that students agree to *before* they do work — they say something to the effect of, "I see these requirements for getting an A [or B, or C…], and I agree to strive to get an A [or B, or C…]." I suppose that makes a certain sense in helping students be aware of course requirements, but it sure seems backasswards to me. It seems backasswards to the students, as well, and Shor relates that they asked for a system that makes much more sense, and is similar

[4] See https://utopian-studies.org/teaching/

to what I've done at times: present the requirements as, "If you do *X*, you'll get grade *Y*." No need for students to declare what grade they intend to get, as if you're then going to punish them for not getting it later. That's just an instrument of torture, and not meaningfully better than more traditional systems.

Here we can see how deep runs the sadism and cruelty inherent to so many educational systems — *even when administered by highly progressive educators!* Again and again while reading the book, I was on the student's side, not character-Shor's.

That there is a students' side to the book is another of its virtues. Shor includes enough replication of conversations and enough student writing that the book really is dialogic. I expect students who were in the course would say that their concerns, frustrations, and critiques were presented fairly, since a lot of those concerns, frustrations, and critiques are quoted verbatim either from their own writings or from Shor's daily notes during the "After-Class Group" sessions where he and a small group of students went over how they all thought the class session had gone, and what might be improved or changed in future sessions.

By including so many student voices, Shor is able to undermine what is, it seems to me, one of the weaknesses of some types of critical pedagogy and socially-committed teaching: its self-righteousness. As he presents himself in the book, Shor's biggest problem seems to be not so much his control freakery as his lack of humility. He knows what books his students should read, what views they should hold, what ideas are worthwhile and what ones not. He has ideas about how to solve society's problems, and he's confident in his analyses of those problems. He sees himself as a good and righteous guy, and he wants to help others along on the path to righteousness.

That's one of the perils of the teacher's position. We are put up there at the front of the classroom in a position where it is expected that we know best. The problem with moving away

from the front of the classroom is that it doesn't really matter where you stand (or sit) and preach from if you're still preaching. A commitment to dialogue is hollow if you are convinced you know the right answers to all the questions. Most teachers recognize this to some extent, and few would actually proclaim that they have all the answers — most teachers I know would say exactly the opposite. But how does that affect our behavior?

(I wonder if we shouldn't do something a bit more radical. What if we leaned in to our imposter syndrome, that feeling of fraudulence so common among people who are not egomaniacs? What if, instead of assuming we are basically good and knowledgeable people, we assumed the opposite? It's perverse, I know, and maybe not good practice, and likely not good for our mental health, but nonetheless it's at least worth it as a thought experiment, especially those of us who are white and male, and thus used to a kind of automatic authority that other people aren't. What if we began from the premise that we are frauds?)

I think there are other challenges to Shor's assumptions and pedagogies, too, including the important challenge of expertise. In the era of "fake news" and anti-intellectualism at the highest levels, expertise matters. Just as we need authority that is not authoritarian, we need expertise that is strong and visible, but self-critical, not hubristic. What the teacher's role is in being an expert and presenting expertise likely depends on the particular course, particular institution, particular teacher. But I do worry that a commitment to egalitarianism may hide some things that are not egalitarian, nor should they be. Expertise must not get lost.

Now, though, I am straying from *When Students Have Power* and from what I wanted to say about it, which is simply that this is a book worth reading if you are a teacher who wants to empower students, and it is especially valuable to read if you have struggled in that commitment to empowering students. (And who hasn't?) It raises a lot of the right questions, and it

depicts a flawed and human teacher working his way toward practical answers. I would love to read an update or a sequel, because I'm curious how Shor's practices have developed, and because so much has changed in the world and in education since the book was published — even though so much, sadly, has not.

—February 2020

How Public? Why Public?

When I started working in the Interdisciplinary Studies program (IDS) at Plymouth State University in the fall of 2018, my colleague and supervisor Robin DeRosa told me that it was a basic principle of the program to encourage students to go public with their work. Encouraging students to work in public was hardly a unique position for us at that time. It was a common idea well beyond our program or field: for students to feel more engaged with the work they do, to feel that what they are doing matters, they need to do that work for an audience beyond the classroom. Progressive wisdom by that time had converged around the idea that students sharing their work beyond the classroom provides them with meaningful motivation to do that work and a greater sense of purpose than is available within the classroom alone.[1]

For those of us who, to some extent or another, agree with the principles of open education, open pedagogy, and open access scholarship, the idea that students should be doing work that is available to a public beyond the classroom is an idea that fits well with many of our basic assumptions about scholarship.

I must confess, though, that while I have at various times in my career had students do work that gets offered to a public (to some extent or another), mostly I have not. Mostly, the work students have done in my classes has been for the classroom. I have often given them various activities requiring them

[1] See, for instance, "Sharing Student Work Beyond the Classroom" by Suzie Boss, Edutopia, 4 June 2018. https://www.edutopia.org/article/sharing-student-work-beyond-classroom

to share with each other, but only in a few circumstances have I ever had them make their work public, and those few circumstances were not, in my eyes, successful.

The fault is likely mine. Even the greatest teachers can't expect to get things right if they only try them once or twice, and I would not claim to be among the greatest teachers. But as I've been thinking about how to adjust my teaching practices and encourage students to get their work out there, to build personal learning networks, etc. — as I've been thinking about this, I've had to face my own resistances. In doing so, I realized that I don't resist going public, but rather resist going public without careful reflection.

One of the reasons I've avoided adding a public component to most of my class activities is that I've never felt I had the time to help the students really think about how and why to bring their work to an audience beyond the classroom, and lacking that reflection, the idea of going public truly terrifies me. Thankfully, I think I have figured out ways to incorporate that sort of reflection into the IDS classes I will now be teaching, mostly because such reflection is key to the habits of mind we try to give our students practice with.

Two questions it might be valuable for any of us to think about are: *How public?* and *Why public?*

The first is double-edged: *How public do you want to be?* and *How do you want to be public?*

All of these questions will affect our choice of tools and venues.

It's easy to think *public* = *internet*, because the internet has opened up vast new publics and vast new access, but the internet may not be the most effective means of bringing work to an audience, particularly if you don't already have some sort of access to an audience that will allow your work to be discovered. It's an attention economy out there, and with demands on our attentions expanding exponentially, it's difficult to get noticed at all.

Thus, any questions of *how* and *public* benefit from thinking about what constitutes a public at all, and what allows access to the publics you want to reach. In many cases, it will likely be the internet; but particularly with local publics, other means may be more effective. I want to see students presenting information at meetings, creating posters to put up around campus, joining an organization that they can participate in and contribute knowledge to, doing local radio and TV shows — and, most excitingly, I want students to find productive ways of going public that I never thought of.

I also hope some students will say no.

Some writing, research, and thinking we do for ourselves. One of the great privileges the academy offers is the time and space to do work that might not lead anywhere, work that might be purely for personal interest. Certainly, we don't want the academy *only* to be that, but we must make room for solitary and/or private work. We ought to be able to celebrate both our highly public teams of scholars and our quiet hermits, and we ought to be flexible enough to allow one to become the other.

(Perhaps I am protective of the hermits because the possibility of hermitting has long been one of the great attractions for me of an academic life. It's a Romantic notion, even a self-indulgent one, I know, but still, the attraction is strong. So, too, the attraction of silence.)

With the internet, *how* and *public* are words worth thinking especially closely about, because there are so many different ways to go public on the internet. For instance, the internet allows a kind of anonymity that can be empowering for some people, problematic for others, and both for many. Trolls thrive on anonymity to say reprehensible things and to torment people. But anonymity (or pseudonymity) also leads to new possibilities. I have no idea who a few of my favorite writers on the internet are — for instance, this week I read an extraordinary essay by Film Crit Hulk about violence, hostage

situations, movies, and the late food critic Jonathan Gold.[2] I shared that essay with lots of people, and they shared it, too. The writing is public (and reached many publics), the byline *Film Crit Hulk* is public and has a large catalogue of writings associated with it, but is the *person* behind Film Crit Hulk public? They may be — I haven't really looked — but even if they are, the pseudonym allows a distance between writer, text, and reader that is unavailable to those of us using our real names. (Speaking of Jonathan Gold, in "Two Cheers for Anonymity", he wrote about anonymity as a restaurant critic. Later, he went public as himself.)[3]

For me to give credit to my students' work, I need them to be public with me, but that does not mean they need to be public to the world. There are plenty of legitimate reasons to create a pseudonym. The internet can be a brutal place. Thus questions of the *hows* and *whys* of working in public often get entangled. How you go public may depend on why you go public.

If your goal, for instance, is to show potential employers that you are a person of substance, achievement, and expertise, then you can't be anonymous, because the whole point of being online is to get your name out there. If your goal is to advocate for a marginalized, vulnerable group of which you are a part, then you would want to think long and hard about how comfortable you are having your name associated with that sort of publicness, because being public could come with real dangers, including physical dangers. If you're getting close to controversies (and sometimes even if you're not), you'll need to consider

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[2] "A Grim Day For LA: A Hostage Crisis and the Death of Jonathan Gold" by Film Crit Hulk, *Observer*, 23 July 2018. https://observer.com/2018/07/film-crit-hulk-a-hostage-crisis-and-the-death-of-jonathan-gold/

[3] Jonathan Gold, "Two Cheers for Anonymity", *LA Weekly*, 30 December 2010. This is no longer online, but many references to it and quotes from it are. See also "Jonathan Gold drops anonymous restaurant critic mask" by Jonathan Gold, *Los Angeles Times*, 23 January 2015. https://www.latimes.com/food/jonathan-gold/la-fo-food-critic-outing-20150124-story.html

how much harassment you're willing to put up with, given that the internet is, indeed, full of trolls and can sometimes feel like a cesspool firehosed all over you. It might be that you're much more comfortable dealing with trolls from behind the armor of a pseudonym, a separate persona from your self, than you are from behind your own name. Or you may decide to put yourself out there, but deliberately and carefully, with a particular focus (e.g. sticking to an uncontroversial professional presentation).

I want my students to put their work out there for the world to see. I've been doing so myself for many years, and it has truly affected the course of my life. But I also want students to know about the risks, to think carefully about how they craft their online footprint, to learn about things like Gamergate, to pay attention to the privacy settings of online tools. We should all be able to choose for ourselves, in as informed a way as is practical and possible, how and why we are public.

—July 2018

Afterword (2026)

Since I wrote it in July 2018, I have assigned this essay to my students in at least one class every term. (Their favorite sentence is, consistently, "I also hope some students will say no." At first I thought they liked it because they planned to refuse my encouragement to make their work public, but that's usually not the case — they are astonished by the idea that a teacher wants students to challenge a command.) I do not otherwise assign my own writing to my students (how gauche!), but I want them to understand my perspective on this topic. Most of my courses include at least one assignment which I encourage the students to make public, and one of those courses, Interdisciplinary Studies Senior Seminar, requires it of the final project (unless the student can make a good case against doing so, which two or three have). The benefits of writing for real audiences outweigh most of the downsides, but the key point, as with so much pedagogy, is intentionality. The important questions remain the ones of the title of this essay: *How?* and *Why?*

The Good, the Bad, and the Interdisciplinary

Interdisciplinarity is one of those words, like *openness* and *diversity*, that many people in academia like to affirm as a positive value — but when it comes to building the structures and supports necessary for it to be a meaningful practice, things get complicated, challenging, frustrating. The idea of interdisciplinarity is appealing, but the implications may unsettle long-established norms. Worse, the generally positive connotations of the word can be weaponized, wittingly or unwittingly, for destructive purposes.

Since I am a Director of Interdisciplinary Studies at a regional state university (in a state consistently opposed to funding education adequately), I have a particular interest in how the word gets used. Drawing on the scholarship of Julie Thompson Klein, William H. Newell, Allen F. Repko and others, I work from a fairly simple, practical understanding of disciplines as fields that share content, methods, epistemologies, and objects of study. Multidisciplinary work brings together different disciplines without a goal of integrating them; interdisciplinary work's goal is the integration of the different contents, methods, epistemologies.[1] When teaching about interdisciplinarity, I adapt Moti Nissani's clever fruit metaphor:

[1] Some scholars such as Klein also identify other types of study such as *transdisciplinarity,* but I have not found this concept useful. I prefer taxonomy to be as clear and simple as possible, since taxonomy is always contingent and inadequate.

disciplines are fruits, multidisciplinarity is a fruit salad, interdisciplinarity is a fruit smoothie.[2]

The definitions of disciplinarity, multidisciplinarity, and interdisciplinarity are not really the issue, however. Whether a particular practice is or isn't (sufficiently) interdisciplinary is something of a side question, one of more interest to taxonomists and pedants than me. I am something of an outlier in the world of Interdisciplinary Studies because I don't actually think the theory itself is hugely difficult or needs long attention. The difficulties and problems are in the application of the concept of interdisciplinarity.

This is clear in Matthew Dean Hindman's recent essay for Academe, "Interdisciplinarity's Shared Governance Problem", which argues that the concept of interdisciplinarity is being used by administrations to impose a neoliberal agenda on the structures of higher education, moving power away from faculty and toward the university president's cabinet.[3] Hindman writes:

> Cost-conscious administrators and board members—guided by management consultants, many of them with limited or no academic experience—are prone to embrace an interdisciplinary academic structure as a cost-

[2] Nissani, building on the work of Roland Case, is quite good on the nature and definition of *integration*: "By integration we mean uniting or meshing discrete elements. Integration can be partial, as, for example, when parallels are drawn between elements which remain separate; or complete, as, for example, when separate elements are fused into a single entity. To be meaningful, integration must satisfy the condition of coherence: the blending of elements is not random, but helps to endow our knowledge, research, or instruction with meaningful interconnections and greater unity." See Nissani, "Fruits, Salads, and Smoothies: A Working Definition of Interdisciplinarity." *The Journal of Educational Thought (JET) / Revue de La Pensée Éducative* 29, no. 2 (1995): 125. The paper is also available on his website at https://drnissani.net/mnissani/pagepub/SMOOTHIE.htm

[3] *Academe* 107:4, Fall 2021: 26-32. Available online at https://www.aaup.org/academe/issues/fall-2021/interdisciplinaritys-shared-governance-problem

> efficient antidote to the perceived ills of the traditional university, with its allegedly plodding, territorial faculty. Promoting "interdisciplinarity" as a solution to the supposed proliferation of academic "silos"—and as a way of reducing faculty ranks amid a feared enrollment crisis—consultants such as EAB provide universities with the rhetorical framing and public-relations messaging to justify the consolidation or even elimination of discipline-based departments. Disciplines, according to this telling, impede efficient management by fostering competition for resources among self-interested departments; these departments, meanwhile, evaluate faculty members largely according to criteria and standards established by scholars and their disciplines rather than by university officials.

This strikes quite close to my own home, since our little, beleaguered school some years ago hired a president who has committed us to the idea of "integrated clusters", a concept which in its implementation has often been at best awkward, at worst an engine of chaos and frustration.[4] We got rid of departments and replaced them with varieties of unwieldy administrative blobs. The concept of clusters is quite interesting and could be valuable, but a huge mistake was made when the university abolished the basic infrastructure of staffing and reporting that allowed that university, quite literally, to work.

The cluster initiative has led, though, to some good things, most prominently our grant-funded Cluster Pedagogy Learning Community professional development series, which is perhaps the only thing that has kept faculty and staff optimistic about the future of clusters.[5]

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[4] For some official description of "integrated clusters" from my university, see https://coursecatalog.plymouth.edu/integrated-clusters/

[5] See the chapter "The Value of Uselessness" for more on the Cluster Pedagogy Learning Community.

And I *am* optimistic about that future. It's why I wanted this job, why I wanted to work at this place. My own scholarship (and life!) has been tremendously interdisciplinary, and I believe to the core of my being that this is the only way forward, particularly for schools such as ours. One of the things that increases a sense of frustration, in fact, is the feeling that we are so close to creating something wonderful.

I don't want to get bogged down here with the ups and downs of my own university's initiatives. Rather, I want to examine some of the assumptions that seem to strap all of us who work in schools into concrete boots of our own making — and also to look for some assumptions and practices that might help us move forward. I do believe interdisciplinarity can help us in the current environment, and I want interdisciplinarity to empower faculty, inspire students, placate administrators, and satisfy the counters of beans.

Interdisciplinary Action

Let's start with some of Hindman's critique, which I agree with broadly, though I disagree with some specifics (and overall I think Hindman demonstrates too much faith in the solidity of disciplines).

The problem, as Hindman shows, is that real interdisciplinarity is not a synonym for cost savings. You should be skeptical of anyone hawking interdisciplinarity as a way to reduce costs. They are not talking about interdisciplinarity, they are talking about austerity — the active disinvestment in higher education as part of a larger process of redistributing public goods toward private markets. Applied to education, austerity politics, in Michael Fabricant and Stephen Brier's analysis, "disproportionately denies the poorest students, especially those of color, quality higher education."[6]

[6] Fabricant, Michael, and Stephen Brier. *Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016: 4.

Interdisciplinary programs are not new, though often they do not call themselves specifically interdisciplinary, and often they are aligned with progressive politics (conservative politics is defined by its insistence on hierarchy, and interdisciplinarity questions, messes with, and undermines hierarchies of all sorts). Thus, universities are more than happy to eliminate actual interdisciplinary programs, including ones that don't cost much money, because universities are themselves conservative institutions that venerate hierarchies. Women's & Gender Studies programs, for instance, are inherently interdisciplinary and often first to hit the chopping block.

It can be challenging for interdisciplinary programs to be visible, or even functional, in structures that remain fundamentally disciplinary in their assumptions. When faculty are attached to one disciplinary major, and students work within that one disciplinary major, programs that integrate multiple disciplines must adapt to such a structure, which can lead to confusion, friction, and frustration for students, faculty, staff, and administrators alike.

Among interdisciplinarians, I am in the camp that believes strong interdisciplinarity does not work without strong disciplinarity. Disciplines may be fuzzy, with some disciplines having an inherent interdisciplinarity of their own, but we can get a somewhat clearer view if we see disciplines as like nouns and interdisciplinarity as a kind of verb: we *have* disciplines, but we *do* interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinarity does not have its own content, method, epistemology, or object of study. It uses those of the disciplines, putting them into action together.

Hindman states that the evidence for disciplinary silos is overblown and that "if relevant, problem-driven research is the goal, we do not need to tear down and reassemble academia's basic organizational building blocks." While I agree that people within the disciplines are often, in fact, quite good at doing interdisciplinarity, and I agree that more and more of what we call disciplines are interdisciplinary at their core, there are still

some real obstacles to interdisciplinarity embedded in our academic structures. We have constructed some of the walls we're pounding our own heads against, and a fear of paternalistic, austerity-besotted administrators gone wild should not harden us against useful reforms — reforms that might empower us to do better teaching and research while also showing administrations a different path forward.

Let's consider the cluster initiative at my own school, since that's what I know best. From my perspective, one problem we keep bumping up against is that institutional leaders (for good reason) want clusters to be nouns: things to sell to potential students, legislators, donors, etc. They want to be able to point to things they call "cluster majors" as evidence of innovation, even when those "cluster majors" are things that other, bigger schools already have and which we're basically just rebranding within the confines of a small school. This isn't (or shouldn't be) a matter of empty marketing. We have some severe enrollment challenges now and over the next ten years; if we don't distinguish ourselves from other schools, we will face further losses of programs, further losses of employees, further cuts to budgets. The cluster idea has proved attractive both to new students and to new employees. The problem isn't interdisciplinarity; the problem is we haven't figured out how to make our structures support it better.

What if the excitement of clusters is not that they allow, say, forensic criminology as a major (biology + chemistry + criminal justice), but instead that they allow students and faculty different ways of working together. We say that our school's vision requires interdisciplinarity, a commitment to diverse ways of knowing, and a determination to help students take control of their own educations. That's all well and good, but it needs scrutiny. To achieve such a vision, we must create structures that support communication, collaboration, and integration; we must not turn disciplines into primordial goo (diversity of knowledge means recognizing and analyzing

multiple epistemologies; without multiple epistemologies, there isn't any diversity); we must empower students and faculty together. The opportunity for interdisciplinarity resides far less in any one thing than it does in a set of actions.

A "cluster major", then, ought to be any major that demonstrates flexible paths toward completion and requires multiple epistemologies, multiple ways of talking about knowledge. And it should be empowering. This requires flexibility not only of the students but also of the curriculum and the teachers. That need for flexibility is where we run into some problems, yes, but also opportunities — most importantly, opportunities that I think administrators, teachers, and students can all get excited about.

The Interdisciplinary Challenge

A useful book for anyone looking at interdisciplinary work in higher education is Lisa R. Lattuca's *Creating Interdisciplinarity: Interdisciplinary Research and Teaching among College and University Faculty*, which rather than proposing a new theory or taxonomy instead surveys actual teachers and researchers about how they work and think, then places this lived experience in conversation with various theories of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity.

Lattuca shows that real interdisciplinarity is not cheap, especially in the short run. "Developing interdisciplinary and team-taught courses required more preparation time than a disciplinary course and informants benefited from provisions of summer salary, course releases, and funds for teaching or research assistants to compile and organize course materials. Informants' experiences suggest these incentives are good investments in faculty productivity."[7]

[7] Lattuca, Lisa R. *Creating Interdisciplinarity: Interdisciplinary Research and Teaching Among College and University Faculty*. Vanderbilt University Press, 2001: 257-258.

Repeatedly, Lattuca found that faculty were empowered toward interdisciplinarity by two things — financial support and structural changes: financial support for course development, faculty development, research costs, team teaching, building up new tenure lines; structural changes that bring faculty of different disciplines together formally and informally, promotion and tenure guidance that encourage interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching, policy changes that facilitate experimental courses and programs.

This is the interdisciplinary challenge to austerity. Austerity requires workers to do more work with less time and less money. Meaningful interdisciplinarity requires (especially at the outset) more time and more money. We don't simply declare interdisciplinarity — we invest in it.

One of the participants in Lattuca's study was a teacher and administrator who said:

> What I am interested in for myself and for other people — as an administrator and also as a faculty member — is making sure that as much as possible we are supportive of and encouraging of people who are interested in connecting with other knowledge seekers and that we help each other as much as possible to learn more. That seems to me what interdisciplinarity is. And to the extent that we keep people from connecting, that we keep students from making connections, that we keep university structures from allowing groups of people to connect, then I think we are probably not fostering knowledge in the fullest way that we can.[8]

If we are committed to interdisciplinarity, we must ask what within our institutional structures and policies facilitates connection, collaboration, and integration. We must show *how* we support this, not simply assert that we do. We must also

[8] Lattuca, 260-261.

seek out the structures and policies that impede connection, collaboration, and integration. That is not only about fostering interdisciplinarity — it is about supporting the construction and sharing of knowledge, which is the whole point of a university in the first place.

The challenge is not for administrators alone — far from it. Interdisciplinarity is an area where faculty can lead, if they choose to do so, via their work as department or program chairs, as committee members (both at our institutions and for our professional organizations and publications), as scholars, and as teachers. If administrators say that interdisciplinarity is important to them, then that offers us an opportunity to show how it can work and what sorts of policies and resources we need to make it more than a buzzword but an actual and valuable practice.

The possibilities are many, but in the interest of modeling some ways of thinking about interdisciplinarity, let's think about one common structure of higher education: the major.

What Is a Major?

The current environment for higher ed requires that schools without huge financial resources be flexible and fleet, able to adjust to changes in demography and culture that will make or break enrollments. Majors are one area where we ought to be flexible, but we often tie ourselves in our own knots.

One assumption I think creates unnecessary obstacles is the idea that majors are something other than ways to organize teachers and students to work together. Majors are a bureaucratic tool — often a very good one — and not immutable truths.

We cling to majors because we ache for stability. Majors are a wonderful way to bring stability to the vast and ever-

shifting sea of opportunities a university offers students. That's their best use, and we need not lose that usefulness. Majors are a type of valuable disciplinarity (even when they are interdisciplinary), a way for students to delineate the content, methods, and epistemologies that they want to study most deeply.

If faculty see their own security and stability as tied to the existence of one or another major, though, change will be impossible. This is not the faculty's fault; it is the fault of administrations that account for faculty via majors.

My school's initiative to create "cluster majors", for instance, shows little sense of what those majors might be or how they differ from non-cluster majors. The whole thing is nonsensical if we cannot say what makes a regular major what it is and what makes a cluster major what it is. In one sense, I help create cluster majors every day in my job as Director of Interdisciplinary Studies, since our program exists to allow students to create their own majors by melding two or more other majors together into one. It's a good system, and one that has existed in one form or another at our school since 1974. But institutionally we've struggled to create cluster majors because we have failed to get the administration to understand majors as a kind of strategic illusion. ("Strategic" in the sense of strategic essentialism, a political approach whereby, for the sake of needing to do something immediate and practical, we accept a concept we know to be hollow.) At my school, we have had in the past year a bruising conflict over low-enrolled majors, and this has had a terrible effect on faculty members' willingness to experiment with majors, even as the administration says a big point of eliminating low-enrolled majors is to make room for and encourage faculty to create new cluster majors. In practice, it felt like people were having their majors ended by the administration to force them to create new cluster majors or else lose their job. (I'm not sure that's what the administrators themselves thought they were doing; it doesn't matter, because that

was the effect.) Again and again, we were told that despite the faculty in them wanting these majors to stay, they had to go because they didn't have enough enrollments — even when the faculty in those majors had perfectly respectable course enrollment numbers. The administration's communications were vague, incoherent, and contradictory because they were not motivated by any real vision but only by the desire to cut costs. Lacking a clear vision other than austerity, the administration sunk their teeth into the idea of using major enrollments as a way to account for faculty — and in doing so made their own priority of cluster majors more difficult to achieve than it needed to be.

Thus, majors were eliminated despite strong votes against elimination by the faculty in those programs and then by the faculty as a whole, setting up a terrible us *vs*. them fight between faculty and administration. Bitterness now poisons both sides, with faculty unwilling to work with administration and administrators declaring that faculty are afraid of change — a toxic statement, really, because our faculty are not afraid of change so much as they are afraid of chaos, disempowerment, and unemployment.

One problem is that we're stuck thinking that majors are a real thing, when we need to move toward seeing majors as flexible. We actually have some examples on campus, and not just my own program of Interdisciplinary Studies. To me, a major like our BS in Elementary Education & Youth Development is a nice example of a clustery major because the field of education is inherently interdisciplinary and the major as designed has considerable flexibility for students. Indeed, my own program has fewer students since Youth Development was created because students who previously would have had to be Interdisciplinary Studies students now have a more structured option, but one with a lot of the flexibility they desire from IDS. This is a loss for my program but a win for the university and our students, so I support it enthusiastically. Similarly, our BS

in Allied Health Sciences, which is a somewhat less flexible program than Youth Development but one that holds a variety of different options under its single umbrella (cluster!). When it was created, it, too, led to many students no longer needing Interdisciplinary Studies, and this is a good thing because it shows that the curriculum has the necessary flexibility within its structure for this major to serve a variety of types of students. Heretical as it may seem, I think my own program shrinking is a good sign for the university as a whole. Unless the university itself is based on the idea of individualized majors, individualized majors are not an efficient way to proceed. We will always need such a program for our most curious and quirky students (we love them!), but for the institution overall, the goal should be well-designed, flexible major programs that meet the needs of the students we serve and want to serve.

I can support the ebb and flow of majors to my program because I feel relatively secure in my job — the program is successful and inexpensive overall, and there will probably always be a need for it. (It's older than I am, after all.) Other faculty, even tenured ones, have no such sense of security.

Faculty Are Not Majors

As I said above, one of the things our administration has never, to my knowledge, been able to explain is how low-enrolled majors cost money. Certainly, low-enrolled *classes* cost money and we need to have as few of them as possible, because the road to bankruptcy is paved with full-time faculty teaching courses of only five or six students. Rich schools may be able to afford this; we absolutely cannot. (We could do it with adjuncts, since we don't pay them a living wage or benefits, but maybe we should try to limit exploitation rather than expand it…) It is certainly possible that a low-enrolled major has some

advanced courses that have low enrollments, but such a situation does not have to be a certainty if the advanced courses are, for instance, open to other majors. If a major has low-enrolled courses, one path forward would be not to end the major but to adjust the curriculum through cross-listed courses, fewer prerequisites, etc., as makes sense and is possible. Additionally, a strong curriculum ought to have some wiggle room to allow for low-enrolled, advanced courses — these can be thrilling for students, and are one important component of higher education. Indeed, a small, advanced course ought to be something that could feature in PR. While any school with a tight budget will need to limit them, we are only hurting the integrity of our curriculum if we ban all low-enrolled advanced-level courses outright; instead, we should seek ways to predict, accommodate, and budget for them.

Having lots of major programs is not in and of itself a problem. Low-enrolled classes may not even be quite as big a problem as generally assumed, if we take a teacher's entire student load into account. Let's say Prof. X teaches Advanced Advancement of Advances and only gets 5 students in the course. If Prof. X has been around for 30 years and now makes $100,000, that would mean those 5 students would each need to pay $20,000 to cover Prof. X's salary (benefits excluded) — which is actually less than out-of-state students pay in tuition and fees. Of course, this is not all that those students' tuition covers. The money also has to pay for many other costs of running an institution where at least 60% of our expenses are paid for via tuition. So Prof. X teaching a course of only 5 students is hugely expensive and wasteful. But if Prof. X also teaches three large lecture classes of 50 students each, then Prof. X's total student load is 155 students … which is a pretty good deal for the university.

Now, it is entirely possible that a teacher in a low-enrolled major is teaching only low-enrolled courses and thus has a

small student load. Such a situation is not financially sustainable. But it is not inevitable. If a big expense for an institution is salaries, and the biggest source of income is tuition and fees, then you can't have the expense and the income working against each other. That's just brute fact — but the brute fact is teacher/student ratio, not number of majors. Majors are pathways; they are ways of organizing students, teachers, curricula, and (perhaps) disciplines together.

What a school that depends on tuition to sustain itself needs to figure out is the financially-desirable student load for any one teacher if the school is not going to lose money. It's a complicated equation because of the various ways students pay for tuition and fees (and the difference between, for instance, in-state and out-of-state tuition at public schools). Also, some disciplines are much more expensive than others — classroom-based programs are less expensive to the institution than lab-based programs and programs with large equipment costs — so it may require more students to pay for the costs of an Engineering course and its teacher than an English course and its teacher. But there ought to be a way to figure a median and work from that. The number should be high enough to allow fuzziness, because for this model to work it needs to allow experiment and failure, and that means some terms individual teachers will fall notably below the desired student load (and some terms they'll rise above it).

Once we know the financially-desirable student load for any one teacher, we can then work to create more innovative classes, find ways to let majors be more flexible, and maybe even reduce the number of times faculty get tormented by threats from administration, which I expect administrators would appreciate at least as much as faculty.

Rather than focus on the total number of majors or the number of students in any one class, this metric allows the flexibility that true interdisciplinarity needs. If a teacher has two courses with high enrollments, then they should be able (all

other things being equal) to teach a course with a lower enrollment. The university is getting its money's worth from them, and by allowing more flexibility of enrollment (whether in numbers of students in a course or in a major), the university is also getting the innovation it says faculty are afraid of.[9]

Interdisciplinarity As (Good) Opportunity

Matthew Dean Hindman describes the experience of the University of Tulsa's faculty in revoking the administration's plan to promote a shallow type of interdisciplinarity through the dissolution of academic departments:

Without pushback from the faculty, TU risked succumbing to an adisciplinary, and perhaps antidisciplinary, management-centered ethos that would have rendered faculty members ill-equipped to evaluate one another for promotion and tenure, powerless to maintain curricular standards as their capacity to enforce these standards wanes, and unable to preserve connections to the national and international disciplinary communities and professional associations that help academia thrive. While this ethos may have been exorcised from the University of Tulsa, it may be coming to your university next.

The warning here is a true and useful one, and I'm glad Hindman does not call this interdisciplinarity but rather *adsciplinarity* or *antidisciplinarity*. As described in the article (and familiar from some of my own experiences), this is an anti-

[9] After reading this essay's first draft, friend at my university raised an example of an invisible cost of small majors: the time and potential expense of such things as self-studies to look at the viability of a major continuing, ways to increase its enrollment, etc. If lots of faculty/administration time (and perhaps money for consultants) is being spent on growing a major for which there is consistently little interest, then certainly it is more expensive to keep than to let it go. In some majors that require their own, individual accreditation, this can be a real obstacle, but in general this is not an expense required for keeping a major on the books — this is a bureaucratic expense, one that comes from obsessing over the size of majors.

democratic, authoritarian scheme wearing democratic, egalitarian sheep's clothing. Its goal is to make fewer people do more work for less money and to move to the level of upper administration all decisions that actually matter, leaving decisions that the administration cares far less about to the faculty and staff below. Its effect is to create chaos and resentment. This is not a vision, it is a management style.

However, I am wary of simply dismissing this approach and returning to business as usual. Maybe if you're at a big school with a healthy endowment, the traditional structure of higher education will work for you. (Lucky you!) For those of us at smaller schools, regional schools, less prestigious schools, less wealthy schools … we cannot continue as we have. We need to find ways to make our structures more flexible without making them less meaningful.

Adisciplinarity is the enemy, not disciplinarity or interdisciplinarity, both of which we need. There is no interdisciplinarity without disciplinarity first (you can't *inter-* from nothing). Tempting as it might be to combat adisciplinarity by saying, "Return to the disciplines!" — this is not as helpful as it may seem. Disciplines are highly historicized, even material, entities. They exist in a context. They are *made* real by our actions as teachers, scholars, students, and guardians of bureaucracy.

We need both strong disciplinarity and strong interdisciplinarity. This is not just an intellectual exercise. A lack of interdisciplinarity has real-world consequences. A vivid recent example comes from an extraordinary article in *Wired* recently: "The 60-Year-Old Scientific Screwup That Helped Covid Kill".[10] That article shows that understanding how the pandemic spreads requires aerosol scientists and public health scientists to learn from each other. They needed to think about

[10] Molteni, Megan. "The 60-Year-Old Scientific Screwup That Helped Covid Kill." *Wired*, May 13, 2021. https://www.wired.com/story/the-teeny-tiny-scientific-screwup-that-helped-covid-kill/.

the limits of their own theories of knowledge, as well as the assumptions embedded within their disciplines — assumptions which, being highly disciplinary, they had not questioned. (Epistemology is not only about evidence, but also, at least as importantly, about assumptions.) As the article shows, different disciplines held different assumptions about how the molecules and droplets of infectious diseases work. Until they could work through their differing assumptions, the scientists couldn't properly weigh the evidence in front of them.

I go back frequently to something Cathy Davidson wrote in *The New Education*. Davidson was for some time the Vice Provost for Interdisciplinary Studies at Duke, so she knows her way around both interdisciplinarity and administration. She wrote:

> You free faculty not by insisting they give up the standards of their traditional discipline in order to accept the standards of someone else's. Rather, you reward them and their students for constantly rethinking options, trying new programs, acting inventively and boldly, collaboratively and synthetically.[11]

These two sentences are important because they show one lens through which we can see the difference between administrators with a real vision for interdisciplinarity and administrators seeking primarily to cut costs and assert authority.

Toward Empowerment

Thinking forward, then, we must ask: What are the structures that reward faculty and students for rethinking their work, for experimenting with new programs, for being bold,

[11] Davidson, *The New Education,* 152.

inventive, collaborative? If an institution does not have such reward structures, it is not going to be interdisciplinary.

Reward is a key word here because it is the opposite of *punish*, and it is easy as an administrator (or a teacher) to fall into the habit of punishment more than reward. The work is difficult, demanding, often overwhelming, and so the understandable instinct is to punish obstacles. But even if this has some desired short-term effects, the long-term results are likely to be counterproductive.

Perhaps better than reward or punishment is the idea of *empowerment*. How are teachers and students empowered to work interdisciplinarily? One sign of good administration is that it works to remove the obstacles to the work that the institutional leaders desire. If faculty are not creating the interdisciplinary programs the administration wants, then the useful question is not, "What is wrong with these recalcitrant, change-hating faculty?" but rather, "What are the obstacles? How might we remove them, how might we reward the behavior we seek, how might we empower people toward bold new thinking?"

Consider these questions, just for a start:

- What in your organizational structure promotes collaboration?
- Where is the push toward new types of interdisciplinary work coming from? (Administrators may truly believe interdisciplinary approaches are best for the future of the institution, but if the initiative is only coming from above, it won't be successful for any number of reasons, including that administrators may not be best positioned to understand the frustrations and obstacles facing the people doing the actual work.)

- How is workload allocated, assessed, and compensated? (If interdisciplinarity is a goal, that goal will be reflected not only in a vision of how work is to be shared, but in support for the actual work itself.)
- Whose students are counted toward what programs? (To increase interdisciplinarity, pay less attention to major enrollment and more attention to course enrollments. The courses in a major may be quite interdisciplinary even if the major itself is not. This is really not a problem and may even be a good thing.)
- How do workload requirements encourage experiment? (What support is available for faculty working to build up their course enrollments? If a new course is under-enrolled, what support is available to the faculty member — or is their course just cancelled?)
- How are time and resources allocated for disciplines to learn about each others' content, methods, epistemologies, and practices?
- How is team teaching accounted for? (One of the best incubators of interdisciplinary work is team teaching. It can be a resource challenge, especially for underfunded schools, but a creative institution committed to interdisciplinarity will find ways to support and even encourage team teaching.)
- How much of the institution's push toward interdisciplinarity relies on volunteer work, overload work, etc.? Healthy interdisciplinarity is part of the regular workload. How will the institution make that happen without burning people out?

- Are there steps in the process of creating new courses that could be clarified, refined, or eliminated?
- Are there steps in the process of creating new programs that could be clarified, refined, or eliminated?
- What systems and tools help disciplines communicate with each other to do interdisciplinary work?
- What supports are in place to help students explore and discover majors, minors, and personal interests?
- How does the institution support people facing the hurdles of interdisciplinary funding and research?
- How does grants management work for interdisciplinary projects?
- What seed funding is available for experimental curricula?
- Could student roles be re-imagined? (Students teaching students, for instance, can be a powerful tool for community and interdisciplinarity.)
- What faculty development around interdisciplinarity is available? How is participation in faculty development rewarded?
- How does interdisciplinary work affect tenure?
- Do campus leaders who advocate interdisciplinarity have any understanding of the research on interdisciplinarity?
- Does the institution have ways to stay abreast of new developments in interdisciplinary scholarship and practice?

- How are problems and complaints collected, assessed, addressed?
- How is reward emphasized over punishment? How are people empowered?
- How is interdisciplinary work accounted for beyond teaching and into scholarship and service?
- How are disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity celebrated together?

I'm sure there are many other questions that can be asked, but those are some that come to mind for me when thinking about whether an institution actually values interdisciplinarity. (This list was partly inspired by *Creating Interdisciplinary Campus Cultures* by Julie Thompson Klein, a book that can help with some of these conversations.) Not every institution will be able to answer such questions fully, but if the majority of them can't be answered, then you know you're dealing with more spin than substance.

These questions are not meant to be defeatist or challenging, but rather something of an inspiration. Interdisciplinarity — good, true, strong interdisciplinarity — is an opportunity to build from strengths and strengthen areas of weakness.

Good interdisciplinarity will come not from erasing disciplines; it will come from building pathways between structures that already exist, attending to the labor involved in such work, providing people the time and opportunity to think creatively, encouraging experimentation (while recognizing that lots of experiments fail, and failure is something to learn from), removing obstacles, seeking ways to strengthen disciplinarity while also building bridges between disciplines, seeking ways to analyze what our disciplines are and how they got to be that way — I could go on, but the idea is a fairly simple one and

could take a thousand different forms: **promote exploration and experiment, empower people to try new things, reward boldness, eliminate obstacles.**

This does not need to be an effort that pits faculty, staff, and administrators against each other. Something is terribly wrong if it does. Real interdisciplinary work can strengthen an institution while creating new, exciting opportunities for everyone within that institution. That has got to be our shared goal. The alternative is terrifying.

—October 2021

Of Margins, Refuge, and Survival

When I first started blogging back in 2003 at a Blogger site called *The Mumpsimus*, my blog didn't have a comments section because back then Blogger didn't have a built-in comments tool. At some point, maybe a couple months into the blog's life, I discovered a commenting tool that could be added to the site with a bit of HTML fiddling, and so I added it. (Back then, everything required a bit of HTML fiddling, including every individual post, as there was no WYSIWYG [What You See Is What You Get] editor.) Once my site got some attention, comments started pouring in. Sometimes it was a lot of fun, especially the occasional times when a famous writer stopped by to say hello and offer some ideas. But it also often felt burdensome. Most comments weren't especially great or awful. Some were derailing, whether intentionally so or not; some were flat-out abusive. A few were brilliant and helped me reconfigure my thinking.

When I switched from one commenting system to a newer one and lost all the original comments, I didn't feel any sense of loss. When I changed systems two more times (the last to move to Blogger's own native commenting system), I also felt no sense of loss. Then, a couple years ago, when I decided to get rid of comments altogether, again I didn't feel any regret, and was never tempted to turn comments back on.

> To analyze the pervasive character of the border's operations — let alone the marked violence that accompanies them — we need a more complex and dynamic conceptual language than that which sustains images of walls and exclusions.
>
> —Sandro Mezzadra & Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, The Multiplication of Labor* (Duke University Press, 2013)

As Freud would undoubtedly agree, how we come of age shapes us for a long time. Though I first started using the internet in the mid-1990s, I really came of age on it via The Mumpsimus. The early days of blogging were, for me, incredibly exciting, incredibly empowering, and incredibly bruising. (I expect just about every reaction I have to internet things and to digital technology generally could be explained, or at least contextualized, via how things happened in the first few years of my life as a blogger.) I had never been consistently part of a general public before, never had my thoughts and feelings out there for anybody with an internet connection to see — and then comment on. And I had an easy time of it. I may be queer, and write openly as a queer person, but I'm still a white male in the U.S., writing in a style that may be seen as convoluted and/or pretentious, but at least is seen as somehow "standard" and "educated". There are people who get in one day more abuse online than I've across all these years. And what I've gotten is enough to make me pretty damn cautious.

I never for a moment had to wonder why Audrey Watters would create a script to prevent Genius and Hypothesis from adding annotations to her website.[1] When I read Watters' post about it, I almost grabbed the script myself. I understood that decision from a very deep place.

[1] See Audrey Watters. "Un-Annotated." April 26, 2017. http://audreywatters.com/2017/04/26/no-annotations-thanks-bye

I was brought back to that very deep place recently when reading *k-punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher*, which includes discussion of the evolution of the comments policies at Fisher's *k-punk* blog.[2] *k-punk* began a month after my own blog, and I read it from its early days, though not religiously, as I didn't yet have enough understanding of the contexts and philosophies Fisher was writing from to be able to make sense of a lot of it. But it was hard to avoid *k-punk* if you were blogging back in the early days of this century and had an interest in left politics. I remember when Fisher posted a new comments policy in September 2004 — things got contentious, to say the least, with Fisher seen by plenty of die-hard members of the blogosphere as some sort of sell-out or traitor. Five days later, Fisher decided to turn comments off on all future posts, and that's the way things stayed.[3]

"Yesterday," Fisher wrote on September 10, "when I closed most of the current comments boxes down, you can't imagine the relief I felt. I could come to k-punk without feeling sick with anxiety about what unthought out oedipalised rage, overgrown adolescent boy sulks and gliberal stupid American platitudes ('hey man, all that Marxist lingo makes my cringes cringe…') I would have to deal with.

"It was definitely more stressful than work. And I have a very stressful job."

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[2] *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004-2016).* Edited by Darren Ambrose. Repeater Books, 2018. See also "Mark Fisher's 'K-Punk' and the Futures That Have Never Arrived" by Hua Hsu at the Page Turner blog of *The New Yorker*, December 11, 2018. https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/mark-fishers-k-punk-and-the-futures-that-have-never-arrived.
Fisher's blog, k-punk, remains online at http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/

[3] "New Comments Policy" 5 September 2004: http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/004079.html. See the comments preserved there for some sense of the controversy.
"Comments Policy (Latest)" 10 September 2004: http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/004109.html

I remember reading that and feeling sympathy as well as a certain amount of envy — envy both of the conversations he was inspiring and envy of his decision to send those conversations elsewhere. I never got even a fraction of the comments that Fisher got, but even still, whenever a new comment came in, I braced myself, ready for combat.

Not too much later, Fisher created a forum, Dissensus. I don't remember reading it back then, but I might have. I don't know Fisher's actual reasons for starting it, or how he thought of it in relations to *kpunk* — he may have expressed it online somewhere, I haven't looked — but I can make an uneducated guess that the forum worked for him in a way comments on the *kpunk* blog didn't because the forum's whole purpose was community discussion, while a blog's purpose may be more individual. And social media something else again.[4]

> …we can say that border as method for us is as much about acting on the world as it is about knowing it. More accurately, it is about the relation of action to knowledge in a situation where many different knowledge regimes and practices come into conflict. Border as method involves negotiating the boundaries between the different kinds of knowledge that come to bear on the border and, in so doing, aims to throw light on the subjectivities that come into being through such conflicts.
>
> —Sandro Mezzadra & Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, The Multiplication of Labor*

[4] Dissensus is still alive at https://www.dissensus.com/. Fisher's first post there, explaining some of his reasoning, is at https://www.dissensus.com/threads/64/.

The sentence that most stuck with me from Fisher's declaration on shutting down comments was: "The comments boxes have become almost completely unproductive. Almost all of the worthwhile discussion happens between members of the kollektive, who, if the comments boxes weren't there, might be inspired to produce their own posts." That, I thought then, was my own ideal. Not people conversing at one central site, but at their own sites, and linking to each other to create a web or rhizome, a discussion with many entrances and exits, paths in a journey with no fixed destination, no single end.

("All middle," Galsworthy said of Chekhov's stories, "like a tortoise.")

Of course, blogs and blog comments are so, like, last decade. Facebook and Twitter took over. By the time I turned comments off at *The Mumpsimus*, most of what previously would have gone into the comment boxes appeared on social media. If I'd crunched the numbers, I'm sure I would have been able to graph a compelling correlation between the rise in social media's popularity and the fall-off in commenting at my site.

But that would have been only one part of the story.

I didn't need Twitter and Facebook for my site to lose commenters. I'd gotten rid of most of them myself. I started running the site in a way that quite deliberately cut down on its audience: posting only occasionally, writing long posts, writing about whatever I happened to want to write about rather than about the hot new things or the day's controversies or all the people who were wrong on the internet. I decided I wanted to write in a way to discourage casual, fly-by-night readers. Part of my anxiety over the site had to do with people just popping in, as they will do on the internet, and spouting off without any knowledge of *why* I was writing or what I had written in the past. Plenty of times, they didn't even seem to have read much of the post they were commenting on. Many people did not seem to want to be in a space where they could think together;

they wanted to be in a space where they could put their opinions on display.

But yes, like many bloggers, I also cut way down on the types of posts that now made better Tweets or Facebook posts — short, immediate stuff — and that, too, reduced audience.

> For all of these reasons, the border is for us not so much a research object as an epistemological viewpoint that allows an acute critical analysis not only of how relations of domination, dispossession, and exploitation are being redefined presently but also of the struggles that take shape around these changing relations. The border can be a method precisely insofar as it is conceived of as a site of struggle.
>
> —Sandro Mezzadra & Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, The Multiplication of Labor*

When it comes to meaningful thinking, I am easily undone by cacophony, and easily perceive multiple voices to be cacophonous. I suppose it's why as a student I've never much enjoyed class discussions, and why as a teacher I struggle to make them work. (*Struggle* is not always failure. But knowing that class discussion is not something I have great talent for, either as participant or leader, I tend to seek other formats, other ways leading on to other ways. The workaround that I have found most successful in my own classes is to have students break into groups for discussions. I don't mind those as much myself as a student, and seem to be able to manage them better as a teacher, mostly because it allows me to only have to "manage" the ones that aren't working and let the ones that are working do their thing.) If I am ever in a group of more than 3 or 4 peo-

ple and don't know them well, I usually won't talk unless directly addressed, and will probably feel awkward, uncomfortable, and that the whole event is taking much too long — whereas I have no trouble with 1 or 2 newish/unfamiliar people, and often, in fact, enjoy such interaction and want it to last longer.

It makes sense, then, that the kind of internet space I feel most comfortable with — something like the blogosphere of old — replicates a lot of those dynamics. Our individual ideas of cacophony vary, but managing cacophony may be the difference between having a valuable online experience versus a tormenting one.

As I write, I find myself returning to the word I used above regarding classroom discussions: *struggle*. Not automatically fail, not automatically reject, but struggle. Seeking the good struggle, the struggle toward progress or knowledge, trying to get away from the pointless struggles, the struggles that just waste time and energy, the struggles that beat us down until we don't struggle anymore (the boot pressing the face into the mud).

In conversations about being committed to opening up education and to finding tools for people to use to bring margins to the center, it's easy to fall back on slogans from other contexts — to talk about, for instance, *speaking truth to power*, a phrase sure to bring a shiver of righteousness to the heart of anyone with a deep sense of justice. Who among us doesn't want to speak truth to power? We have the truth, they have power, the people united will never be defeated no justice no peace what do we want TRUTH when do we want it NOW—

(The title of my autobiography could be: *I Have Qualms*.)

I think back to Audrey Watters's rebellion against the digital annotation tools of Hypothesis and Genius. Does digital annotation actually speak truth to power? As I think of "speak truth to power", no, but my idea of that phrase may be more insistently radical than other people's idea of it. Perhaps digital

annotation does *speak*, but it's not going to be heard unless the powers-that-be are already primed for listening, in which case you're not so much speaking truth to power as engaging power within a mutually-agreed discussion space. Which is valuable — indeed, exactly where we might want to get to — but it comes *after* what I, at least, think of as speaking truth to power, which is much more of an intervention. It's not speaking truth to power to say, "Hello, please add this extension to your browser so that you can see what I have to say to you." That's submitting a tech request to power.

Digital annotation may not really have the ability to speak outward in an insistent way, but it can easily have a community-building effect because of its ability to create borders. It can be invisible except to certain users, certain groups, those in the know, the elect. The margins become a place where people of shared identities/inclinations/interests gather to comment. That can be a group of students working on projects in a class or it can be a group of racists using digital tools to create a safe space for their hatred.

What *would* be speaking truth to power via digital annotation? One method might be hacking and defacement — scrawling your idea of truth across the screen of power. Which is sometimes absolutely necessary, but it is a heckuva lot more invasive and obstructive than any digital annotation tool! There's an aggression to speaking truth to power, as I use the term, because it requires a crossing of some significant borders, and it requires getting out of any safe space, any walled room. It's deeply uncomfortable and potentially dangerous. It requires usurping the right to speak from the power that is either ignoring or denying that right. It requires struggle and conflict, and it requires taking a position that can't be ignored. Otherwise, you're speaking truth to the wind.

I suppose I am skeptical about the whole idea of speaking truth to power because if we've learned anything from neoliberalism it's that power only listens to whatever strengthens and

consolidates power. We've known for decades that capitalism is happy to, as Thomas Frank long ago said, commodify your dissent.[5] We don't need to speak truth to power. We need to put obstacles in the way of power, we need to disseminate power, to redirect power, to appropriate power, and maybe even to cut off the sources of power.

> …the reproduction of borders within the commons—whether they take the form of lines of political division or ones of gender domination, racial difference, or indeed social class—can never be excluded. They must always be fought against. This is why the production of the common is always a political and not merely an ethical proposition.
>
> —Sandro Mezzadra & Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, The Multiplication of Labor*

Of course, lots of the time we don't need to think of ourselves as speaking truth to power. Sometimes we're just dusting off a shelf or smelling the roses or going for a Sunday drive or making a quick meal or watching some mindless television. Sometimes that's what we need the margins for, as a place to hang out and do our thing in relative peace and quiet. Spend all your time speaking truth to power and pretty soon you'll lose your voice.

When I consider digital tools, pedagogy, academic life, and their relations to margins, marginality, marginalization, and

[5] See "The American Nonconformist in the Age of the Commercialization of Dissent" by Thomas Frank, *The Baffler*, no. 3, March 1992. https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-american-nonconformist-in-the-age-of-the-commercialization-of-dissent. That piece provided the title for the still-useful collection *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from The Baffler*, ed. Thomas Frank and Matt Welland, W.W. Norton, 1997.

the marginalized, I find myself musing about refuge. Maybe it's because I'm getting old. I don't have the zeal of an activist now; I just want some space to do my own thing with like-minded people. Let the folks who disagree play in their own sandbox. This could, I realize, be considered an anti-political position, a position of cowardice and resignation, of giving up. But it doesn't need to be that, because the work of creating refuge often requires significant challenges to the powers that be, and it provides the space from which people can go out and do whatever work they need to do in a potentially hostile world.

(Not that this is inherently good. It is not. Again: racists finding refuge for their hateful commentary.)[6]

A center may be a place of centripetal force, a place of pressure. Moving to the margins may be the way you don't get crushed, the way you find freedom, or at least rest. But to get to the margins requires the effort of working against centripetal force, the force trying to pull you back to the center, to crush you.

A page contains both margins and text, usually easily discernible, easily seen to be separate, the borders clear.

A globe contains margins and centers, but which is which depends on how you're looking at them, what you are emphasizing or not emphasizing, what your values are, what your position is.

These different metaphors suggest different problems, different analytical challenges.

[6] "New plugin allows the far-right to 'graffiti' any website" by Martin Goillandeau and Makana Eyre, *Columbia Journalism Review,* 11 April 2019. https://www.cjr.org/analysis/dissenter-plugin.php

> Border struggles in very real ways have been expanded and sit no longer at the margins but at the center of our political lives. While they challenge any closed notion of political subjectivity in the struggle for the common, they also confront us with the continued production of other limits that run across societies, labor markets, and jurisdictions.
>
> —Sandro Mezzadra & Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, The Multiplication of Labor*

I keep asking myself: What are the implications for practice? What does thinking about centers and margins, borders and methods reveal for teaching and learning?

I come back to refuge and to community.

Someone tweets out a link to an article about the need for community in social life.[7] I glance at the article and think back to one of the most profoundly gut-punching things I've read in the last decade, "Together Alone" by Michael Hobbes, which is subtitled "The Epidemic of Gay Loneliness" but which is about far more than that (and *loneliness* feels like the wrong word).[8] I remember when Hobbes's article was published and how many of my queer friends (especially male friends) and I passed it back and forth because it felt like it described a world we knew and had never much wanted to talk about because we thought it was just us, just our own quirks and failures, our own private struggle. Certain paragraphs explained things to

[7] "The only metric of success that really matters is the one we ignore" by Jenny Anderson, 12 March 2019. https://qz.com/1570179/how-to-make-friends-build-a-community-and-create-the-life-you-want

[8] "Together Alone" by Michael Hobbes, *Huffpost*, 2 March 2017. https://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/gay-loneliness/

me about myself that no therapist ever had been able to pinpoint, and the friends I talked with about this essay felt the same (though often we were talking about different paragraphs). Later, I thought: How interesting that we all knew whom to share this article with immediately. And also whom to never share it with.

It's valuable to think about how we carry our margins with us. Much of my daily life is spent with straight people, which is usually fine, but now and then events remind me — and them — that whatever margins they carry are different, that very visible borders to me, borders that sometimes become walls, are for them invisible and open.

And depending on the borders and walls, that feeling is true for all of us. (We are globes, not pages.) My straight, white, male, athletic friend is also severely dyslexic, and that has formed and deformed his life in ways similar enough to how my queerness has shaped mine that I have begun to suspect it is the great bond between us, when we have so little else in common and yet are so close. They aren't equal, of course, our obstacles or challenges, our struggles, but they overlap enough to produce rhymes and harmonies.

Maybe that's what I'm working toward here: the music and poetry of margins. Find the rhymes, be aware of the discords. How might margins work together, how might we lead each other over borders invisible to one and impregnable to another?

In the article about community that I just saw flow across the tweetstream, the writer says that "what I would come to learn, slowly, is that community is about a series of small choices and everyday actions: how to spend a Saturday, what to do when a neighbor falls ill, how to make time when there is none. Knowing others and being known; investing in somewhere instead of trying to be everywhere. Communities are built, like Legos, one brick at a time. There's no hack."

Small choices. Everyday actions. Knowing others and being known. Investing in somewhere rather than everywhere. Communities are built.

I like that. I want to consider what sort of communities might be built within productive borders (*somewhere rather than everywhere*), borders that allow and encourage action, while providing refuge from harmful, narrowing, stultifying borders (*knowing others and being known*). What are the everyday actions of our work and life that contribute to building such a community, what are the small choices to be made?

I want to bring my margins to see what music they make with other margins. Let borderlines become chords.

—April 2019

Disciplined Making

In *The New Yorker*, there is a long and depressing article titled "The End of the English Major" by Nathan Heller, an article that explores the fast decline in enrollment in English majors and classes at schools throughout the United States.[1] It's well researched, and doesn't entirely fall into the standard media trap of basing all its ideas on things happening at the famous wealthy schools that do not educate the majority of American students. (Like Heller, most reporters for influential media outlets like *The New Yorker* went to those famous and wealthy schools, and most such reporters seem incapable of understanding that their experience does not translate to that of the majority of college students or faculty.) Though Heller writes of his own experience at Harvard and interviews students and faculty from that place, he also spends good time at Arizona State and gets quotes from people at schools that reflect the more common student experience in the U.S. Obviously, Arizona State is a gigantic school that is utterly different from, say, the small regional public school that I work at, but at least Heller tried.

Much can and will be said about Heller's article, an article which is not only about the decline of the English major per se but about the decline of the humanities, the quantification of

[1] "The End of the English Major" by Nathan Heller, *The New Yorker*, 27 February 2023 (online), 6 March 2023 (print). https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/06/the-end-of-the-english-major

everything, and perhaps the complete death of intellectual culture. (Fun!) However, my own interest was drawn to two ideas, perhaps because they are directly applicable to my own school's situation. Those ideas are *disaggregation* and *making*. If there is hope for the humanities, and for intellectual work generally, these two ideas might help us find it.

Disaggregation

Heller draws the idea of disaggregation from Robin Kelsey, an art historian who is also Harvard's dean of arts and humanities whose goal is to "disaggregate what departments do". The idea is one familiar to contemporary higher education — my own school officially got rid of "departments" in a (continuing) effort to do something like this. Since departments are human constructs created, in the way we currently understand them, in the late 19th century, and brought into their most recognizable form in the 20th, they are ripe for remaking. I am myself pretty much neutral on the question of departments and disaggregation. Administrators tend to like the idea because they see it as a way to save money: if you take the Department of Things and meld it with the Department of Stuff, you can get rid of all the staff necessary for the two departments and have one single Department of Things & Stuff! This is the concept of consolidation beloved by many business gurus. It may sometimes work, but in my experience it is a nightmare of unforeseen consequences, with all sorts of institutional knowledge lost.

This does not mean disaggregation is a bad idea. What we need to do is to start thinking about what we are disaggregating, what the units are, and how we might re-aggregate in exciting and productive ways.

Often in these discussions — at least the discussions I've been part of — we forget what the basic units we're talking about are. Let's start there: **credit-bearing experiences**.

Most of the time, these are classes. They can also be internships, practica, independent studies, etc. A modern and effective school needs its credit-bearing experiences to be highly diverse while also maintaining the academic integrity of both the experiences and the institution.

Then we have the **students**, the receivers of credit, and the **faculty**, the granters of credit. (I know that some schools have systems in place for students to receive credit in other ways than a faculty member granting it in some way or another. There's much to be discussed there, but I am wary and skeptical. I think one of the strengths for any academic institution, and for academic freedom generally, is that the people granting credit are the faculty. I would understand if you think I am nostalgic for the idea of The Faculty as a body. I kind of am.)

We, the denizens of academia, organize faculty into departments and disciplines because of shared objects of study, shared vocabularies, shared methodologies, and shared epistemologies. These are scholarly affiliations and not necessarily administrative ones. However, they become administrative when questions of evaluation and promotion come up. There is significant difficulty in evaluating the scholarly work of someone whose object of study, vocabulary, methodology, and epistemology are significantly different from your own. There is also a problem of, for lack of a better word, enthusiasm. For most people, it is easier to care about and be enthusiastic about scholarship that is legible and meaningful to us ourselves. I may not myself be a scholar of illuminated manuscripts, I may not even know very much about illuminated manuscripts, but because my training and passion lie in the realm of literary history, I can pretty easily find ways to learn and care about the work of my colleagues who *are* scholars of illuminated manuscripts. Scholars of quantum physics … it's harder. This has practical and administrative repercussions. It makes sense in

many ways to organize faculty within groups where they can express the greatest solidarity with the least effort.

Students are organized differently, though our administrative systems sometimes hide the difference. We organize students within majors (and minors, options, certificates, etc. Let's just use one word for the sake of clarity here). Majors are administered by departments. There are good arguments for disaggregating majors, making them more modular. However, it seems to me that it still makes sense *not* to disaggregate departments, at least not wholly. To understand why, let's talk about identity.

Identity. Youdentity. He/She/It/Theydentity.

I would not normally head toward the word *identity*. The way the word is used in current social and political contexts makes it unappealing to me on a basic philosophical level: identity as something whole, coherent, and longlasting within a personal self. My own philosophy owes at least a little something to thinkers like Heraclitus, Dōgen, and Deleuze, among others — philosophers of change, flow, impermanence, and becoming. Such a philosophy complicates (to say the least!) any relationship to identity as a category.

However, reading Anne-Marie Slaughter's essay in the new issue of *Daedalus*, "Care Is a Relationship" (a response to another essay in that issue, "Caregiving in Philosophy, Biology, and Political Economy" by Alison Gopnik), I was struck by the productive ways she uses identity to mean something more than personal identity.[2] Slaughter writes:

[2] The two essays are available online: "Care Is a Relationship" by Slaughter: https://www.amacad.org/publication/daedalus/care-relationship "Caregiving in Philosophy, Biology, & Political Economy" by Gopnik: https://www.amacad.org/publication/daedalus/caregiving-philosophy-biology-political-economy.

> As physicist and ecologist Fritjof Capra describes it, the semipermeable membranes between cells are "not boundaries of separation but boundaries of identity." They keep the cell distinct as an identifiable part of the whole but simultaneously connect it to the other cells, connections that it requires to survive and flourish. Just so, my identity as a family member — mother, wife, sister, daughter — means that I am both distinctly myself, with my own goals and interests, *and simultaneously* part of a larger entity that defines me and determines a different set of goals and interests that unite me with others.[3]

This is a powerful way to think about disciplines and interdisciplinarity. Whatever we think of as our home discipline (for me, literary studies) is a bounded identity, a cell — but one with semipermeable membranes, and interdisciplinarity exists in the ways the membranes between cells allow exchange, growth, and transformation. Disciplinarity — identity — is a kind of precondition. Interdisciplinarity is not only an action, it is also a relationship.[4]

A school that has healthy interdisciplinarity is an institution that allows identities to exist but also to keep their membranes semipermeable. It allows people to remain distinct in their interests and scholarship while simultaneously encouraging them to build beyond those interests and scholarship toward the institution (and even farther), which itself is perhaps

[3] Slaughter, Anne-Marie. "Care Is a Relationship." *Daedalus* 152, no. 1 (2023): 73. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01962.

[4] This is too specific to keep in the main text, but I can't help wanting to put it somewhere: Within Gopnik's schema (pp. 73-74) of reciprocity … mutuality … solidarity … identity, interdisciplinarity is what exists in the middle: mutuality ("overlapping identity and shared interests") and solidarity ("a sensation or emotion of unity" that draws from partially separate identities). Reciprocity is one form of multidisciplinarity, when two separate disciplines work together but maintain their separations; identity is the complete fusing of disciplines to the point where they are no longer distinct.

something like Gopnik's "larger entity that defines me and determines a different set of goals and interests that unite me with others."

Something I, as a Director of Interdisciplinary Studies, have to say with disturbing frequency is: You can't have interdisciplinarity without disciplinarity. Despite being a noun, interdisciplinarity is not a thing, it is an action. If we were to throw caution to the winds and create a major in Things & Stuff, the things and stuff would have to come from somewhere. (This is frustrating to think about when you are trying to save money by cutting expenses such as faculty who teach classes in things and/or stuff. Or when trying to save money by canceling low-enrolled courses in things and stuff. Or ending low-enrolled majors in Things, Not Stuff.)

In my idea of disaggregation, students are the re-aggregators. Through the process of re-aggregating, they build their own identity as scholars. Still, they need something, and somewhere, to re-aggregate from. They need, in other words, a good range of credit-bearing experiences that they can then weave together into a single, unified learning experience.

This is all threatening to get too abstract, so let's put it on pause for a moment while we move to the next concept I was attracted to in Nathan Heller's article: making.

Making

Heller writes:

> One afternoon, I visited the chair of Harvard's comparative-literature department, Jeffrey Schnapp, who is involved in Kelsey's disaggregation. … "I always thought that the models of the humanities that we inherited were open for expansion and innovation," he said. … [H]e picked up a brightly colored paperback, which he co-wrote, called "The

> Electric Information Age Book." "This is a book on the history of experimental paperbacks, like Marshall McLuhan's 'The Medium Is the Massage,' " he said, and leafed through, revealing pages of wild typefaces and pictures. Another volume he had co-written used "little microsessays connected to the future of libraries and library furnishings," and was published with a deck of playing cards. " 'Making' can mean writing books, but it can also involve other forms, such as building software platforms infused with values from the humanities," he said…

The idea of *making* may be a fruitful one when linked with interdisciplinarity, and it may help us negotiate the rough terrain of underfunded higher education today, when students quite understandably want to graduate with a degree that will help them attain both useful and fulfilling work. The persistent equation of college with job training is painful to many of us in higher ed, who want a degree to mean more than certification of employability. I am a deep believer in the life of the mind, an advocate of uselessness, but I also believe that to be successful in the current landscape of education, we've got to meet our students where they are. We need to acknowledge and address both their fears and desires. The concept of making might be one way to do that.

Imagine asking a prospective student not, "What do you want to major in?" but rather, "What would you like to be able to make?"

I would like to make a porcelain cup. I would like to make a cure for cancer. I would like to make someone feel less anxious and alone. I would like to make a computer game. I would like to make a solution to homelessness in my town.

Usually, we ask students, "What do you want to be?" But why start with a question most of us can't even answer? (Nor should we. See: Heraclitus, Dōgen, Deleuze.) Sure, sometimes students have a clear idea of a career field or identity that they

want to work toward, and that's wonderful, but most of us need to start at a different spot.

I myself knew only one thing about my educational desires when I applied to colleges: I wanted to make plays. (I wanted to write them, direct them, act in them. I went to the Dramatic Writing Program at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts for 3 years until I decided I no longer wanted to make plays, I wanted to do something else, though I wasn't sure what. Turned out, I wanted to make time to read more and I wanted to make short stories and essays. I also discovered that I wanted to make new scholars by teaching students — or, rather, I wanted to make students less afraid of and more passionate about reading and writing. I wanted to make a space wherein I could share my interests and knowledge and learn from other people's interests and knowledge.)

The concept of making is itself interdisciplinary because one great commonality across disciplines is making. Nonetheless, let's not make any claims of a grand unifying theory here. The concept could be too easy to reduce to the idea of *making a thing*. That would exclude a lot of valuable practices and even whole disciplines. But perhaps it is worth thinking more broadly about what it is we can mean by *making*.

I have just gotten a copy of Peter Turchi's new book, *(Don't) Stop Me If You've Heard This Before & Other Essays on Writing Fiction*. Turchi is the author of two of the most interesting and innovative books about fiction published in the last 25 years: *Maps of the Imagination* and *A Maze and A Muse*. I haven't read all of the new book yet, but I did root around in the appendices in the back, including "Appendix A: Out of the Workshop, Into the Laboratory". Mostly, this is a description of how Turchi runs a writing workshop these days after 40 years of experimenting with that complex and controversial form of pedagogy. He says at one point (the point that gives the appendix its title) that the term *workshop* for this

thing isn't really accurate. "Perhaps something more like a laboratory, a place where hypotheses are tested, experiments are carried out, beakers sometimes explode, fruit fly colonies hatch unexpectedly, and people stand around, examining projects in various stages, rubbing their chins, saying, 'Hmmm' and 'What if we try this?'"

The laboratory idea is as useful as that of making, because a laboratory is both a place to learn about and experiment with making something as well as a place where some things are made — and not just physical products, but knowledge.

Reclaiming Innovation

All of this talk of making and laboratories has me thinking of an editorial I read in *Nature* a few weeks ago. Titled "Is science really getting less disruptive — and does it matter if it is?", the editorial reports on a large study that claims that science has, generally, gotten less visionary.[5] I'll leave the arguments about whether it is or not to the scientists, but I think it is worth pairing this editorial with another from *Nature*, one from a couple months earlier titled "In praise of research in fundamental biology".[6] The final paragraph in that earlier editorial is a *cri de coeur* for less instrumentalized, less utilitarian science:

> *Nature* has been publishing curiosity-driven research for more than 150 years, and readers will not need convincing of the work's value. But we implore colleagues in the wider science ecosystem — the policymakers and those in science-funding agencies who expect to see direct benefits of research investments — to resist the temptation to push for quick returns. We appreciate that pressure to do so will only grow

[5] "Is Science Really Getting Less Disruptive — and Does It Matter If It Is?" *Nature* 614, no. 7946 (2023): 7–8. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-023-00183-1.
[6] "In Praise of Research in Fundamental Biology." *Nature* 612, no. 7938 (2022): 7–7. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-04172-8.

> as countries confront economic recession and cost-of-living crises. But, wherever possible, this pressure needs to be resisted. Basic research must be allowed to thrive.

As *Nature* notes, the pressures against visionary, potentially "useless" science are many, the incentives few. I can't help but think that all of this is related to at least some of the forces killing the humanities and filling our students with anxiety about getting exactly the right major for exactly the right job so they can get exactly the right paycheck and exactly the right life.

Innovation is a word that is beloved of business schools but even in business schools there is a recognition that the systems are failing it. In 2019, *Harvard Business Review* published an article by scholars from Duke University and the University of East Anglia titled "Why the U.S. Innovation Ecosystem Is Slowing Down".[7] These authors are not some wild-eyed Marxists reminding us of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall; these are people who support theories of capitalism and innovation. Some of the forces they identify in universities are similar to those identified by the editors of *Nature*. We have built institutions that incentivize safe thinking.

To bring us back to our primary topic: the best argument I can think of to encourage interdisciplinarity, disaggregation, and making is that doing so might be a good strategy to bring innovation back as a key value for both research and teaching universities. As the editors of *Nature* show, we cannot do that by jettisoning the fundamentals. We need those building blocks, that protection of scholarly identity. We need science

[7] "Why the U.S. Innovation Ecosystem Is Slowing Down" by Ashish Arora, Sharon Belenzon, Andrea Patacconi and Jungkyu Suh, *Harvard Business Review*, 26 November 2019. https://hbr.org/2019/11/why-the-u-s-innovation-ecosystem-is-slowing-down

(and everything else) based purely on curiosity if we are going to have a solid foundation from which to innovate.

Visions don't just appear. We have to do the legwork to create an environment in which visions are possible.

Toward a Visionary Institution

Let's return to the familiar pieces in our puzzle of the contemporary institution of higher education: *credit-bearing experiences, students,* and *faculty*. (This is not to diminish the importance of administration, staff, or community! We're thinking about one strain in a complex system here.)

Especially for underfunded institutions to survive in the current climate, a climate quite hostile to the idea of the public good, we need credit-bearing experiences to be as diverse and flexible as possible. Students want lots of options and modalities. There is no way to have integral interdisciplinarity without meaningful, often upper-level, courses and experiences with real depth. Interdisciplinarity requires a broad range of disciplinary expertise to draw from. We need lots of cells if we're going to make the most of permeable membranes. We cannot be more membrane than cells. (Truly valuable interdisciplinarity may, for that reason, demand more resources than disciplinarity.)

For credit-bearing experiences to be diverse and flexible, we need to think carefully about how majors are structured. Let's be honest from the standpoint of your local finance office: we need a way to get the most number of students (within reason) into the fewest number of classes. Yet from an academic perspective, we need the option to run low-enrolled courses, particularly upper-level courses.

This becomes a less intractable problem if we think first about teachers and not about either majors or departments. The goal is to maintain a teacher-student ratio that does not bankrupt the school. (I think there should be a goal to do that

with as many tenured or tenure-track faculty as possible. Otherwise, we end up with the kind of terrible exploitation we see at most universities in this country right now, with the majority of classes taught by the least-paid and most-precarious employees.) To achieve this, we need students from multiple majors to take classes with faculty who may themselves be part of a single department. This is especially important for faculty whose departments are associated with low-enrolled majors. The courses themselves don't always need to be the cells — they can be the membranes. The faculty and students can be the cells. The institution provides the environment that keeps both cells and membranes healthy.

Let's talk about majors for a moment. Here's an idea: a healthy and innovative modern university finds a way to offer as many low-enrolled majors as it possibly can. Why? Because *this is what students want*. We get told all the time to stop thinking about universities in the old medieval way and to start thinking about students as customers. I bristle against that idea for all sorts of reasons, but there's nothing wrong with thinking about what can attract students to an institution and provide them with the sense of purpose and belonging they need to stay till graduation. I think when it comes to reflecting on what makes an institution attractive to students these days we can say with some confidence: flexibility. All sorts of high-paid consultants will tell you that today's students want their experience to be as flexible and customizable as possible because that's what they want from *everything*.

And in this case I think we should give it to them as much as we can.

Recently, I had a conversation with a prospective student who was disappointed that our school no longer had an anthropology major. We will probably lose that student, and if they were interested in doing a pure anthropology major, we *should* lose them, because they won't be happy at our school. However, I was able to point to ways to incorporate elements of our

anthropology minor into other things and put together either an interesting major-minor combination or a customized Interdisciplinary Studies degree. Having those options helped. But I began to think of what else I would have liked to be able to tell that student.

Our school is not going to add a bunch of anthropology courses. We have too much trouble maintaining enough student demand to justify it, despite some awesome teachers. But note what I just wrote. *Awesome teachers*. Dude! We do not want to lose awesome teachers! Further, we need awesome teachers and interested students to work together. We ought to have, at the ready, a plan for students to mix anthropology with other stuff.

There are various ways to do that, including ones we are already doing, and I don't want to get into the weeds of it all here. (What we need to focus on doing is making it all simpler and clearer on the student side.) But I do want to advocate for not just creating work-arounds, but creating intentional flexibility that is invigorating to students, faculty, and the institution as a whole. It needs to be not, "Ugh, sorry, no we don't have enough students interested in it to have anthropology major, but we can cobble some stuff together for you maybe if you don't mind taking a bunch of independent studies?" and instead be, "No, we don't have anthropology major. Other schools do, and if anthropology as a discipline is primarily what you're interested in, we're probably not the school for you. But we do have anthropology teachers. And we have a lot of flexibility in moving pieces and modules of majors together to create something interdisciplinary. Faculty know how to do that here and they like doing it because it keeps their jobs interesting. So if you're interested in learning an anthropology core with a surrounding series of courses in, for instance, psychology or business or sustainability or history or biology or criminal justice — that we can do. Our limits are only the clas-

ses that we offer, but it helps that most of our classes are designed for this kind of work. Very few of even our highest-level courses are limited to one major. Call it interoperability. It's what we do."

This is not, in and of itself, all that innovative. However, it is part of an environment that is friendly toward innovation and that seeks to reduce the risks and costs of experiment, which is — not coincidentally! — a key element of both innovation and learning. An environment that promotes and supports its students and faculty experimenting together not just in lab classes but at the very level of the credit-bearing experience itself … is an environment that will promote innovation. Real innovation. Maybe even new visions of what learning and teaching can be.

—March 2023

THREE

Cruelty-Free Syllabi

There is a sadism to syllabizing.

"I wish it went without saying," the educator and scholar of teaching and learning Jesse Stommel wrote in a Tweet in February 2019, "that syllabi should not be instruments of abuse." Stommel was responding to a news report from *Inside Higher Ed* about a Howard University professor who refused any excuses for students missing an exam, including family deaths.[1]

We may not notice the cruelty embedded in our syllabi until a significant event makes it clear. Responding to Stommel on Twitter, the historian and professor Amanda Seligman wrote, "I stopped making my syllabi about policing behavior after reading an article about a mother who obeyed her professor's decree to turn off her cell phone in class and missed the call from the daycare saying her child had suffered an allergic reaction and was taken to the hospital."

Look at that again: *A mother who obeyed her teacher's decree to turn off her cell phone in class and missed the call from the daycare saying her child had suffered an allergic reaction and was taken to the hospital.*

(I've received a few drop-everything-and-go emergency phone calls in my life. The thought of missing one makes me shudder.)

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[1] "Professor Brings New Meaning to 'No Excuses'" by Colleen Flaherty, *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2019/02/11/professor-brings-new-meaning-%E2%80%98no-excuses%E2%80%99.

Too many syllabi are premised on the idea that students are untrustworthy, that they're trying to get away with something and the course policies exist to prevent them from doing so. Such syllabi start from a punitive position, a place of "thou shalt not", and foreclose opportunities for conversation and collaboration.

Here's my old cell phone policy, for which I received praise from various teachers who thought it was well worded and well conceived:

> We will all keep our cell phones off or on vibrate during class. Of course, none of us is rude enough to text during class, but if we were to be rude enough to text during class we should not be surprised when we are asked to leave class for the day and receive an absence for it.

In its attempt not to be obviously authoritarian — or, perhaps, to soften some qualm I wasn't admitting to myself — its tone is patronizing. It was also not a policy I actually believed in. Yes, I got (and get) annoyed with students for texting during class, but I never enforced the policy, even in my earliest days of teaching college. If a student was texting for more than a few seconds, I would ask them not to, unless it was an emergency, and they would apologize and put their phone away, and class continued. So why did I create a policy — a policy not required by any university guidelines — that I really didn't want to enforce?

When I started teaching at a university, I thought this sort of thing was necessary on a syllabus. I had spent a decade teaching at high schools where syllabi were only a page or two long and utterly uninformative. Some terms, I forgot to hand out syllabi at all, because they were little more than a formality. I remember being shocked when a friend who had just started teaching at a college said she spent weeks writing a syllabus. I had never spent more than a couple hours writing one. But

then when I got hired to teach at a university, I went looking for sample syllabi, because I knew they had a different sort of importance in college than high school, and I wanted to be a good college teacher, not just a high school teacher who happened to be teaching in college. I remembered my own college experiences. I was excited by the opportunity to be free of high school administrative strictures, to be able to challenge students in new ways, to dig deeper into material I cared passionately about. I read the university's syllabus guidelines. I asked friends to share their syllabi. For the first time in my life, I spent months writing syllabi.

I did the best I could with the knowledge I had, and that's what I keep thinking back to: the best I could do with the knowledge I had led to gargantuan syllabi filled with punishments. *Thou shalt not* was the subtext of most of my policies. My assumption, starting my career as a college teacher, was that college should be punishing.

In my own experience, college had *not* been punishing. Not as a whole. Certainly, there were difficult moments, some of them truly awful (the sadistic German professor who caused me to have to spend many hours in the counseling center and not graduate on time was a highlight of my undergrad years), but mostly what I found in college was refuge. I found people with similar interests to my own, I found courses that challenged my knowledge and developed my skills, I found faculty who were deeply compassionate, who treated me like a worthwhile human being.

My assumption that a college syllabus should be authoritarian and even perhaps cruel was not, then, an assumption based on my own experience of higher education, but was rather an assumption born of ideas I had received, absorbed, and not questioned — ideas from influences more disparate than my own experience. I'm not sure what all of those influences were, but I know part of it was actually an extension of some of what we used to tell our high school students about college. I

worked for most of my high-school-teaching career at a college prep school, so the assumption was that all of our students were headed off to higher ed. Students who skipped classes, didn't do homework, etc. would often hear something from a teacher to the effect of, "You're going to be in for a big surprise when you get to college and your professors don't put up with this nonsense and just fail you." We'd tell students stories of professors who locked the classroom door one minute after class started; stories of receiving a paper back with nothing written on it except the words "Improper formatting" and a big F in red pen; stories of people getting expelled for plagiarism because of one improper citation; etc. Few of these stories were based on our own experience, which is not to say we thought ourselves to be lying to our students. Certainly, there *are* professors who lock their doors to punish latecomers, and there are professors who have all sorts of persnickety pet peeves about assignments, and academic honesty is very taken seriously … but the fact is, we used the idea of How Things Are In College to strike fear into our students. We told them scary folk tales in which college professors played the role of the wicked witch, the cruel stepmother, the wolf, the demon…

And so when I became a college professor, some part of me thought I needed to live up to the spirit of the fables I had spent many years telling students. I didn't see myself as a villain in a fable, but rather as A Demanding Professor with High Expectations. It was a role I was not suited to play. Not that I don't have high expectations or want my students to learn more than they ever thought they would. I do. But life is not a fable, and my personality is not suited to the role of the hard-nosed punisher.

My current policies are quite different. The strictest policy is for attendance. I differ from some colleagues with whom I agree about just about everything else on syllabi. I have experimented with not having attendance policies, and I have ended up in situations with students that I didn't feel comfortable

with, and I didn't feel comfortable because we had not had a clear policy. (I was chair of our university's Academic Affairs Committee for a while; I love a clear, practical policy.) My attendance policy is now as loose as I'm currently comfortable making it, I want to note something about it, though: It's premised on communication and conversation. [See the appendix at the end of this chapter for my attendance policy at the time, plus how it evolved into my current attendance policy.]

Communication and conversation is how I try to reconcile my own need for students to be in class consistently with their often hectic lives. I could probably boil my attendance policy down to: *I need you to be in class for your own sake and for the sake of the class as a community, but I know life can throw obstacles at us, so if you start finding yourself facing a bunch of obstacles to consistent attendance in this course, let's keep the lines of communication open.* It's a little more strict than that because in practice I've found that I have limits, and I think it's only honest to let students know as much about those limits as I know myself. A number of times last term, I found myself saying to students, "You cannot pass a course you don't attend." So I added that sentence to the syllabus. That seemed more honest than pretending to be tougher than I actually am … or pretending that I don't care if students are in class. I do care. It matters to me a lot. Over time, what I have learned is that I need to make it explicit to students *why* I care about the things that matter to me a lot. Because most schooling provides students with structures and rules they are not supposed to question, most of us in schools, teachers and students alike, are not used to thinking about why we do what we do in the way that we do it. If we do things only because we know we are supposed to do things that way, we will have less commitment as well as less ability to reflect on our successes and failures than we have if we know the underlying logic and purpose of what we are doing.

In Joshua R. Eyler's *How Humans Learn*, there is a subsection in the first chapter (a chapter about curiosity) that struck me. It's titled "Don't Be Scary". The section begins:

> Our first step in fostering our students' engagement with or rediscovery of their curiosity should probably be simply to make sure that we are not doing anything to inhibit their curiosity. As it happens, anxiety of all kinds has an extremely detrimental effect on the willingness of our students to explore new ideas and to ask questions. … As novelty increases, so do both curiosity … and anxiety. At a certain point, the degree of novelty is such that curiosity wanes but anxiety continues to rise. When the anxiety is great enough, and the risk of pursuing the stimulus is perceived to be too high, people will withdraw rather than continue to press further.

Pointing toward insights in a later chapter on emotions, Eyler says, "Students cannot learn if they are fearful or anxious."

Now remember what Jesse Stommel said: "I wish it went without saying that syllabi should not be instruments of abuse."

When I was beginning to teach college courses, I wrote syllabi with the express purpose of being scary — syllabi that I know inspired fear and anxiety. (Students told me so. It was what began my journey toward trying to create cruelty-free syllabi.) I don't really think they were instruments of abuse. But … I'm not sure. And I see that uncertainty in the development of my syllabi over the years, each one growing less and less authoritarian. I didn't like the hint of sadism I sensed in myself.

Has anybody done research on discourses of sadism and education? Something not quite so theoretical as Foucault writing about schools and prisons. I like *Discipline and Punish* as much as the next guy, but I'm thinking more practically, less

theoretically. I mean investigation into why people want teachers to be cruel. What it is in our conception of teaching that draws out a sadistic streak even in the meekest of us. (And, for that matter, we ought to think about why some sadists are drawn to being teachers. I know it's not the majority of the profession — there are an astounding number of great and compassionate teachers — but most people I know have at least one harrowing story about a teacher whose only pleasure seemed to come from humiliating and degrading their students.)

Eyler's statement that students can't learn if they're fearful or anxious should not be controversial. Yet so often we seem to need to view school as necessarily punishing and "good teachers" as instruments to carry out that punishment. What desire makes us want education to have a streak of cruelty?

You see it on social media all the time, both from teachers and non-teachers: the celebration of cruelty, of *teaching those kids a lesson*. Just the language of that saying is tinged with sadism: If I *teach you a lesson*, in contemporary American English at least, the implication is that I have *schooled* you, I have beaten you somehow, I have humiliated or degraded you. Even our language expresses this commonplace idea that education is inherently cruel.

We need to work against these discourses of sadism. When our friends post stuff on social media about how great it is to punish students, or tell stories about the punishing force of education as if those stories are fables with good moral lessons, we need to ask them, "Why do you want education to hurt? Why do you want it to be filled with fear and anxiety? What desire within you does this idea satisfy? Why do you want to promote cruelty? Who hurt you?"

I wish somebody had asked this of me long ago. (I would have been shocked, incredulous.) I wish somebody had even recognized it a little bit, the strain of sadism in my own approach to education. It was no good, folks. It didn't help my

students, and it certainly didn't help me as a teacher. Without realizing it, I was frequently at odds with myself, frequently trying to teach in a way that would lessen the punishments I myself had instituted with my policies and attitudes. So much of the student behavior that I sought to control, discipline, and punish was a result of the environment I myself had created as the teacher. I don't think I was ever *particularly* cruel; indeed, I think I was less so than some of my colleagues. But still. That's not enough. We can be better.

Hippocrates was onto something: "I will use treatment to help the sick according to my ability and judgment, but never with a view to injury and wrong-doing. … Into whatsoever houses I enter, I will enter to help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrong-doing and harm…"[2]

I think again about the mother who missed a phone call alerting her that her child had been taken to the hospital.

Are there places where cell phones should always be turned off? Sure. Theatres and cinemas, courtrooms maybe. Not my classroom, though. I don't want to be that cop. I want students to use their judgment, and I want to talk with them about the choices they make and the choices I make, and see where we agree and disagree, and why. Conversation, not decree.

Maybe *you* do want all cell phones off in your classroom. I can understand that. Truly. But I can't stop thinking about a parent missing a call saying their child is in the hospital. Or a student missing a call saying a parent is in the hospital. Or … any number of other emergency scenarios.

Is your cell phone policy cruel? I don't know. It's for you to investigate your own motivations, your own desires. Are you indulging your taste for sadism? (Which may be fine in some places and circumstances, consensual ones. But is your

[2] The Hippocratic Oath. In *Hippocrates*, Translated by W. H. S. Jones. Harvard Classical Library. Harvard University Press, 1923, p.301. Available at http://archive.org/details/hippocrates01hippuoft.

classroom an appropriate place for that? Have your students consented to your cruelty?)

I have adjusted my attendance policies, abandoned the punitive cell phone policy, abandoned late work policies, and de-emphasized evaluative grading so as to emphasize feedback and revision — all in favor of encouraging conversation with students.[3] Now, for instance, rather than having a policy about cell phones or laptops, I talk with students early on in class about all of our habits with technology, about what habits bother us and what don't, what effect our behaviors with our technology do to our experience of the classroom. I want my students to be thoughtful in their use of technology, but I also want them to answer emergency phone calls if they get them, just as I'm going to do.

We can disagree about all sorts of details of pedagogy, about the structures of institutions, about educational reform, about so many other things — but shouldn't we be able to agree to some basic principles like *Don't be scary* and *Don't be cruel.*

We can remove the sadism from all of our policies and practices by working to emphasize feedback, reflection, and revision over graded evaluation; to distinguish between soft deadlines and hard deadlines; to guide students through the difficult, confusing, and often contradictory terrain of life in higher education.

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[3] For instance, with late work, I tell students that if they want feedback on their work, they need to turn it in on time, because the deadline is to help me manage my own schedule as well as to encourage them to stay current with the course content. If they turn in work late, it goes to the bottom of my priority list. This isn't to be punitive, it's just to acknowledge the reality that I do not have endless time; in fact, I have very limited time, and our course schedule helps me provide the most attention to my students' work whenever possible — and that, I tell them, is why the deadlines are what they are. (We also often talk about deadlines as they are coming up and adjust them if we're all in agreement that they need adjustment. Until deadlines arrive, I'm happy to have them be a topic of conversation and negotiation and, if possible, adjustment. My goal is not for students to hit a bunch of deadlines; my goal is for them to be able to do the best work possible in the conditions we all share.)

It's remarkable what happens when we apply such straightforward ideas to our curriculums. It doesn't require being a genius teacher, it just requires remembering that students are human beings, and that we ought to be compassionate toward each other and treat each other as we, ourselves, would like to be treated. It really is as simple as starting from there.

While removing abusive, cruel policies from syllabi may require a shift in perspective, it does not need to create a less rigorous or productive classroom. A syllabus based on generosity, that seeks to create conversation, that uses what we know of how humans learn — that is a syllabus that will set up an environment to keep students more engaged with the work and better able to participate in the shared creation of knowledge.

Don't be scary on your syllabus or in your classroom.

Don't be cruel.

—2019–2020

Appendix

My attendance policy when I wrote this chapter was as follows:

> Strive for perfect attendance with this course. We only meet once a week, so if you miss a week, you miss a lot. That said, stuff happens. You're an adult, and I will treat you as an adult. If you need to miss class, tell me beforehand if you can, so I can plan for it. I do not need to see doctors' notes or anything

> like that. If you have multiple absences, I'll check in with you and see what's going on.
>
> Because this is a Pass/No Pass course, either you attend enough classes to pass … or you don't. Much of our work in class can't be replicated outside of class. This is not an online course (though we use lots of online tools). Regardless of the reasons for your absences, you cannot pass a course you do not attend. If you have more than one or two absences, I will begin to wonder if I can grade you by the same standards as other students and if you therefore ought not to pass.

Over time, I got frustrated with the vagueness of the policy. It felt somehow dishonest — the fact is, for most classes, if you miss a certain number of class sessions, even for entirely valid reasons, there's no way to make up the work. I needed a better way to be able to recommend that a student withdraw from the course because they would be significantly better off restarting it from the beginning. I also needed a way to communicate the importance of our being together and working together not as isolated individuals but as members of a classroom community.

Here, then, is my current policy for the course, which I continue to tweak and adjust:

> Attend and engage to the absolute best of your ability, and when you can't, try hard to **let me know as soon as possible**. I hope you don't miss any classes, because missing even 1 class may have an effect on your learning. (We only have 1 class/week, so missing 1 class means missing 1 week!) If you miss class, you will, indeed, miss stuff. More than that, we will miss you. Absences detract from the whole class experiences for everyone and the learning community we are trying to create. That said, life happens, and I

understand that you may not be able to attend every class session.

IF YOU MISS...

1 week of classes: You don't need to do anything. Stuff happens. I don't even need to know anything about it, but if you want to let me know, I'm happy to hear.

More than 1 week of classes: Inform me of what's going on as soon as possible. I'm not going to yell at you, or, for that matter, criticize you in any way. I don't need to see doctors' notes. We just need to chat to make sure you've got a plan.

Many (3+) weeks of class: *Three or more absences I do not excuse will lead to an automatic grade of NP.* To avoid this, be sure to communicate what is going on! Don't be a ghost!

Missing 3 or more weeks of class is a big deal. Depending on how much you have missed and where we are in the course work, I may recommend that you withdraw from the course because that would be best for your academic record and progress. We can only find the best path forward if we talk through the options together.

Note on Incompletes: A grade of IC (Incomplete) is possible if you are only missing 1 major assignment at the end of the term. More than 1 major assignment is too much for an IC to handle.

Afterword (2026)

Most of this chapter is the text of a post titled "Cruelty-Free Syllabi" from February 2019, but I have also brought in a few paragraphs from a short essay I published in the (now defunct) journal *Syllabus* in 2020, a piece based on a presentation I gave at the MLA Conference in January 2020, one paragraph of which I have also inserted here.

The original "Cruelty-Free Syllabi" post was developed after I did a workshop at Plymouth State for our faculty about the idea. I came up with the term "Cruelty-Free Syllabus" simply because I wanted something catchy for a day of professional development where there would be a bunch of workshops for people to choose from. I did not expect to take the idea much farther than that. The workshop went well, so I put the Google Presentation slides online and linked to them via Twitter and Facebook. Robin DeRosa said nice things about it and sent it out to her network. Soon, the Google slides became by far my most-cited academic work, and for a few years whenever I checked in on the slides, at least three or four other people were also looking at them. I wrote up the post on *Finite Eyes* to provide some expansion of the ideas. For a few years, I gave presentations on the idea at universities in the U.S. and Canada.

While I still like the idea of cruelty-free syllabi, the situation of higher education in recent years has led me away from spending much time on the details of attendance policies and syllabus design, because our problems are much bigger now and I felt that a lot of people doing work on teaching and learning were getting stuck in a forest-for-the-trees scenario, endlessly tinkering with the wording of assignments and syllabi while the world was on fire around us. It's undoubtedly good to figure out ways to be less cruel, ways to reduce fear and anxiety, but the most supportive and innovative syllabus is of zero consequence when all the forces of our institutions are arrayed against any real education at all — and, ultimately, against humanity itself.

Against the Grade

The backstory: Me and my grading

I gave a presentation last month [July 2018] for the Summer Writing Institute of the National Writing Project in New Hampshire, which is always a great joy — I was a participant and a fellow at the first two NWP-NH Summer Institutes years ago, early in my teaching career, and they made a tremendous difference in my approach to teaching. Returning as I have for the last three years as a guest author is an extraordinary honor.[1]

Since people return to the Summer Institutes, I always try to change my presentation a bit, and also to use it as an opportunity to try out whatever ideas I happen to be playing with at the time. Last year, for instance, I was thinking a lot about how imagination is key to building a world that is less cruel and more humane, so I talked a lot (perhaps too much!) about the importance of seeing imagination as central to our work not just as writers, but as teachers. This year, I continued some of those ideas, and added to them the concept of writing "the other way" and writing "on the other side" (as in, on the other side of a piece of paper, but also as in "writing on the side of

[1] Sadly, the National Writing Project in New Hampshire has been defunct since 2023. Even more sadly, we lost the great educator, mentor, and force behind NWP-NH, Dr. Meg Petersen, in October 2023. Meg also created the Proyecto de Escritura Nacional (PEN), the Dominican site of NWP, in her second home of the Dominican Republic. Multiple generations of scholars, teachers, and writers benefited from her generous pedagogy.

the other"). This approach encourages messiness and weirdness, encourages playing around with grammar and form, encourages mixing genres, encourages the ecstatic courting of failure.

It's easy for me to get up there and talk about activating the imagination, encouraging students to write against whatever forms we give them, celebrating their creativity, encouraging their willingness to experiment, etc. etc. It's easy for me to say, "We celebrate experimental writers and then encourage students not to be experimental writers. What's up with that?" It's easy for me to be a champion of the strange, the unexpected, the wackadoodle, the unique. Easy because I'm just a guy up there yammering on about writing and teaching. But as everyone who's ever been in charge of a classroom or employed by an institution knows: *There are practicalities.*

And so during the Q&A someone asked a useful, practical question: "If you encourage your students to break all the rules, write against the grain, all that jazz — that's exciting, that's great, but … how do you grade it?"

It's one of the most important questions in teaching, and one that has hindered my teaching for years, because I can, yes, come up with all sorts of ideas about new and exciting activities, and I can, yes, encourage my students to write outside every box and tell them to color outside every line and try to nudge them beyond whatever limits they put on their imaginations — but everywhere I've been employed, I've also needed to turn in grades. And when I was teaching high school, I needed to turn in grades roughly every two weeks, and there were a lot of guidelines I had to follow in grading. So yes. The practicalities. *How do you grade it?*

In the moment of the Q&A, I answered honestly, but not helpfully. How do I grade such writing? "I don't," I said. This is somewhat true, but needs explanation.

For many years, I *did* grade it. I came up with some of the most baroque, Rube Goldberg grading machines imaginable.

Massive flowcharts and rubrics and checklists and 5,000-word bundles of guidelines and — and then one of my supervisors said, "Matt? I've got an advanced degree in science and I can't make heads or tails of your grading system. How do you expect a student to understand this? Can *you* understand this?" (No, I really couldn't.) I'd ached for my grading to be "objective", and yet the scientist was telling me I was going in the wrong direction. Though I felt ridiculous at the time, it was one of the most helpful interventions a supervisor has ever made for me, because it broke me out of the loopy thinking I'd wound myself into, the impossible obsession with getting away from the subjectivity of grading.

I began to wonder if there might be a way I could put into practice the ideas of various education researchers who advocated against exactly the sort of intensive, complicated grading I was doing. I'd known about their ideas for a long time, but didn't think they were practical for my own institution. But now I began to wonder.

I knew I desperately needed to simplify, but I couldn't imagine how to do it. I went back to my old standby, the work of Peter Elbow, specifically the section on grading, evaluation, and feedback in his invaluable book *Everyone Can Write*. I began to think I might be able to let go of some things. As I started to let go, I found that I was communicating better with my students and my students had fewer and fewer confusions about where their grades came from.

Once I started teaching college, I let go of even more. Now, nobody was looking over my shoulder constantly, parents weren't helicoptering around my every move, nobody was checking the averages of my grades each term as they had been before (for a while at one school where I worked, any teacher whose grades were not close to a bell curve got a talking to), nobody except the students cared whatsoever about what grades I gave them. But the students cared *a lot*. And who could blame them? Not I. For many of them, money was on the

line: scholarships, fellowships, grants, parental approval. For some, my class might be the difference between their being able to stay in school and not. I started doing more self-evaluations, and usually I'd give them whatever grade they said they deserved, because usually their proposed grades were a bit lower than what I was thinking of for them myself. The more I did this, the more I felt inclined to give students control over what grade they received. I could always veto the student who did nothing and claimed to deserve an A for existing. (No matter how anti-grade I am, that still offends me.) But those students were extremely rare — I can think of 2 in the last 10 years, during which time I've taught about 600-700 students. Again and again, most students proposed a grade for themselves that was at least within the same letter grade as I considered accurate.

When I started my Ph.D. at UNH, I returned to more traditional grading. I was at a new institution, eyes were on me, and I was just a grad student now. But I kept inching more and more toward self-evaluations and contracts, my preferred methods of grading. Finally, in my last year of teaching during my Ph.D., with a Graduate Student Teaching Award under my belt and nobody inclined to keep an eye on me anymore, I went in a direction I thought was best supported by research and my own experience: a simple contract, a portfolio at the end of the term, and as little grading as possible during the term.[2] It worked well. Not perfectly, but certainly no worse than any other method of grading I've used over the years, and better than most. Importantly, I spent less time fretting about which exact numbers or letters to assign to the students and more

[2] For more details of the course in which I did this, see the post "Experiments with Feedback and Grading in a First-Year Writing Course" on my old blog *The Mumpsimus* here:
https://mumpsimus.blogspot.com/2017/05/experiments-with-feedback-and-grading.html

time communicating with them about their ideas, their writing, and their learning.

Never again do I want to dread looking at student work because of all the time and effort it will require of me to grade it. There were nights when I would look at a stack of papers and sink into utter depression. It took me too long to realize that this was a blatant sign that I was doing something wrong. I was the one giving these assignments, and I was the one who ended up being grateful to the students who didn't turn them in! This is backwards!

The year when I used minimal grading and assigned portfolios was the happiest and least anxious of any of my years of teaching. While friends and colleagues reached the end of the term complaining about the burden of grading, I talked with great enthusiasm about all the interesting things my students were writing. I enjoyed spending time reading my students' writing. I had fun with their portfolios. Again and again, I saw my students pushing themselves in ways they never would have if they had been more worried about their grades, more concerned with "What do I need to do to pass?" than "What do I need to do to write better?"

Now, I have just taken a job that is nearly my grading ideal: all of the courses I'm teaching this year are Pass/No Pass grades. We use a "greenlight" system where the students can revise their work until it reaches an acceptable level (gets a green highlight on our course spreadsheet), and they pass the course if all of their assignments are greenlit. I'm looking forward to seeing how this changes my interactions with students and my design of assignments. It's taken me twenty years, but I'm finally working at a job where the learning matters more than the grades.

The practicalities

> "I do believe in simplicity. It is astonishing as well as sad, how many trivial affairs even the wisest thinks he must attend to in a day; how singular an affair he thinks he must omit. When the mathematician would solve a difficult problem, he first frees the equation of all incumbrances, and reduces it to its simplest terms. So simplify the problem of life, distinguish the necessary and the real. Probe the earth to see where your main roots run."
>
> —Henry David Thoreau, letter to Harrison Blake, 27 March 1848[3]

What I've learned over the years about grading, usually by getting everything wrong before ever getting anything right, can be summed up in two pieces of advice:

1. Simplify! And keep simplifying!
2. Build as big a firewall as possible between feedback and grading.

If you can't get rid of grading altogether, then always remember that it is a form of communication, one that is absurdly reductive. Because grades are radically simple — often, a single letter or number — we need to make sure our grading systems are simple, or else we're going to try to squeeze too much information into a container that can't possibly hold it. It's easy for grades to fail to communicate, or to communicate something very different to each person who sees them. Thoreau was right: *Simplify, simplify, simplify!*

[3] Available online at https://theamericanreader.com/27-march-1848-henry-david-thoreau-to-harrison-blake/

The second point is at least as important. Decades of research show incontrovertibly that if you put a grade on a piece of writing, you wipe out whatever other feedback you give. If you just spent half an hour covering a student's paper with edits and advice, you have wasted your time if you then put any sort of a grade on it (even just a check mark).

Create opportunities for revision, give feedback, and then once there's no more opportunity for revision, grade the final product quickly. By that point, you and the student ought to understand what you both value, and neither of you need to waste lots of time on the final assessment.

What about smaller assignments? That's where grading contracts come in. For work that can be assessed as either done or not done, make it part of a contract that lays out concrete, achievable, assessible features of each type of grade — for instance, "To get a B in this course, you must turn in at least 7 out of 10 assignments that meet the basic guidelines, have no more than 2 unexcused absences, and complete all elements of the final project." There are many, many variations on contract grading possible — see my *Mumpsimus* post, "Experiments with Feedback and Grading in a First-Year Writing Course" and Danielewicz & Elbow's "Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching" for a few examples.

Or stop grading altogether

I aspire to move toward Jesse Stommel's position of ungrading. (See his website, www.jessestommel.com, or his book *Undoing the Grade* for details.) When I first read Jesse's writings about ungrading, I found them liberating, and I continue to return to them for inspiration.

I've almost made it to Jesse Stommel's level of not grading, and at this point the stumbling blocks are mostly psychological. After all, I'm the guy who knew all the research and who personally hated grading and who yet nonetheless kept coming

up with ridiculously complicated grading systems. I am my own worst enemy. Slowly, though, I'm getting better.

And looking back, I've done a lot of the important work for a long time, even if I sometimes let my fears obscure it. I've long used self-evaluations, I've tended to prioritize qualitative feedback, I've had students share and discuss their work with each other for my entire career. It's just that more often than not, I also let grades get in the way. I regret a lot of lost time. I regret even more a lot of lost opportunities for learning.

The work of teaching shouldn't be reduced to the mechanical act of grading or marking. Our talk of grading shouldn't be reduced to our complaining about the continuing necessity of it.

If you stop grading, or even just grade less often and more simply, you will almost certainly become a better teacher.

—August 2018

Pass No Pass

I've turned grades in for this term, so now I am beginning to think about my first experience teaching Pass/No Pass courses. All of the courses in the program I work in now are Pass/No Pass, a concept consistent with the program's emphasis on open pedagogy and student-centered learning. Before the term began, I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about how P/NP courses differ from standard graded courses. I've spent years trying to de-emphasize grading in my courses, so I just thought I'd entered nirvana, especially since I wasn't creating anything from scratch but was instead mostly using syllabi for the courses as they've been taught in the past.

Being new to this system, I hit a few real obstacles and did not provide the best guidance to students. None of it was catastrophic, but now I'm thinking about how to turn the P/NP system into more of a benefit to the course next term, rather than let it remain an oddity or even, perhaps, a detriment.

I've been thinking, too, about Jennifer Hurley's excellent post on Medium from October in answer to the question "Is Throwing Out Grades Too Idealistic?"[1] The questions and challenges she discusses are ones I have often thought about over the years, and my answers have sometimes been similar to hers, sometimes less optimistic. She writes:

[1] Available at https://profhurley.medium.com/is-throwing-out-grades-too-idealistic-d710802e83cd

> I, too, have heard students say that they spend more time on other classes because they fear getting a bad grade in those classes, a fear they do not feel in my class. I, too, struggle with the "slacker" student who takes my class with the mindset of doing the bare minimum to earn the desired grade, and who regards my system of no grading as a way to skate through a required course.

Clearly, the biggest hurdle we face as teachers throwing out grades is the damage already done to student motivation by grades.

This was *not* a problem I faced when, required to issue letter grades for courses, I used a portfolio system that de-emphasized grades. Students would still get letter grades in the end, and the syllabus explained the route to those letter grades. Even though the route was different from those of most other classes, and offered a lot of choice and freedom, it still obviously required quite a bit of work — enough work to fill a portfolio.

What I didn't anticipate when starting to teaching a P/NP course was that many students would consider the very designation of the course as P/NP to indicate that it wasn't an important class, it wasn't one where the assignments much mattered, it wasn't one where anything was particularly on the line for them. They assumed it was a kind of blow-off course that they needed to take to become an IDS major, but it wouldn't require much of them. I had a few students who really resented the amount of work they ultimately had to do because they were working from the assumption that P/NP means you don't have to work hard for a course, since it's not adding to your letter grade GPA. (I should note that I'm really talking about the two sections of Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies that I taught rather than the Senior Seminar. The seniors had already been through Intro and so had some familiarity with how we do things. They and I had plenty of

challenges, but those challenges didn't seem to be related to the grading system.)

Some students also hated the fact that our "greenlight" system of grading required that they complete all assignments at an acceptable level to receive a passing grade. The greenlighting referred to the color in the grading spreadsheet I used for each student: the cell for the assignment would be either green or red once I checked over the work. Red meant they were free and encouraged to revise before the last week of classes, green meant the work was at an adequate level. (Basically, P/NP at the assignment level.) This worked fine for students who paid attention, less so for students who did not — which was a higher number than I expected. As one student said in exasperation at the end of the term, "So if we miss one assignment, we're screwed?!" I don't know why it only occurred to him at the end of the term, when we'd been following the system for months and multiple check-ins reiterated that all assignments needed to be greenlit for students to pass, but the sentiment was hardly his alone.

In a letter-graded course, students can get away with skipping some assignments if those assignments don't count heavily toward the term grade. In a P/NP course with a greenlighting system, a single small assignment that does not get greenlit would (by the letter of the law at least) cause a student not to pass. By the end of the term, I realized I wasn't entirely comfortable with this system, and I further realized that there's an important question I ask myself when thinking about whether a student should pass or not pass, and it's a criterion not well accounted for in the grading system I used: should a student have to re-take this course if they want to get credit for it?

There were a couple students who had not turned in a few assignments by the deadline, and I had to ask myself if I really thought they should not pass the course, and that they should, in fact, have to re-take the course if they remained IDS majors.

That was pretty easy to answer. The students who were just missing a couple small assignments, no, I didn't want them to retake the course. The students who did not turn in major assignments, including their application materials for being an IDS major, yes, definitely, they should have to retake it if they wanted credit.

Thankfully, the students who hadn't turned in the smaller assignments by the deadline got them in eventually and I felt no qualms about passing them, and the students who hadn't turned in the big assignments never did (despite numerous pleas from me, our TA, and our Program Assistant), so I feel no guilt whatsoever about my grades this term — but I *do* feel that I need to adjust the grading system next term to better reflect the reality I now understand. If students miss a few small assignments, yes, I'm still going to pass them. If they miss any one or more of our handful of big assignments, no, I'm not going to pass them and they'll need to retake the course if they want the credit.

This is wonderfully clarifying. I will admit, though, that when the deadline passed and I didn't know who would ultimately turn in their missing assignments, I was ready to give up on P/NP. This was panic, but it was deep panic. I wanted to go back to my beloved contract/portfolio system. But the reason I wanted to go back in that moment was the same reason students want to stick with familiar grading systems: I know how it works, I know how to communicate about it, I know how to get the best results from it, and it sticks within the letter-grading system I've used for 20 years as a teacher and longer as a student. I can recite all the dangers and disadvantages of letter grading, but because it's the system I've known for pretty much my entire life, there's still a certain comfort to it, and whenever things get weird or challenging or unpredictable, I get an atavistic desire to go back to what is familiar.

But I also know that feedback needs to be absolutely separate from evaluation, that opportunities for revision need to be

built into any task if we want meaningful learning, and that if we want students to learn to strive for quality (and hold themselves to high expectations) then we need to separate ideas of quality from ideas of grading. This last point is one of the most difficult for me to internalize, and certainly the most difficult for students to accept, because it pushes against the *raison d'etre* of the letter grading system as well as against the metrics-obsessed nature of contemporary culture. If we let students tie their entire sense of achievement to the grade they get in a course, then it's entirely rational for them to buck against the idea that is fundamental to the P/NP system: You can do barely adequate work and your grade will be the same as someone who does astounding work. The key to being successful with this is to be explicit, to talk about it openly and honestly. As Jennifer Hurley writes,

> If we take the time to talk to students about motivation, and ask questions that make them think, more students will make the leap from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. It's true that some students will not make this leap. That's an unfortunate reality. However, many, many students will discover their intrinsic desire to learn, and this is invaluable.

It's true that not every student will make the leap. We need to admit this to ourselves as openly as we admit anything else. No system works for everybody, and the seductions of the familiar are deeply powerful. This is especially true for students who have done well in the familiar system — any change to that system is a threat, and we know that students raised in an educational environment full of high-stakes testing will find the threat of change sometimes so anxiety-provoking as to be debilitating.

This fact is another virtue of P/NP, though. Who among us always does our best work all the time? Sometimes, because of life or mood or whatever, we need to just get some work done at an adequate level. With P/NP, the student is free to decide

when to do their best and when to just get by. The grade will be the same. For most people, doing just enough work to get by doesn't feel particularly good. It's not inspiring, it's not fulfilling. That opens an opportunity for the teacher to help students reflect on such feelings. Working hard requires opportunity and encouragement in addition to intrinsic desire — indeed, opportunity and encouragement can often spark that intrinsic desire. I didn't do this well this term because I was struggling just to keep my own head above water, but now that I'm more familiar with the job, I've got some ideas of how to be better at creating opportunities and offering encouragement.

Many of my students did wonderful work this term, especially toward the end, once they got comfortable with some of the technological requirements and had accepted that the course was really about how they might take control of their education. One student wrote in a final reflection, "For me, this experience was about taking control of my education, rather than simply going along for the ride." Quite a few other students wrote something similar. Or, as another student wrote, "I think the key point of what I've learned this semester in Intro to IDS is that the people who achieve great success in life are the people who can see their passion. They reach towards it in everything that they do."

I'm thinking about all this as I work on revising my syllabi for next term. I need to build on whatever successes I stumbled across — mostly thanks to what I inherited from my predecessors' syllabi — and try to fix some of the bumpiest parts. (These are my classes now — I don't need to worry about ruining everything for somebody who is going to come back and take over for me, so I feel free to redesign as I will.) What can I do to acknowledge that no, I'm not going to fail somebody for missing one or two small assignments, but yes, the big assignments will determine whether you pass or not? (I think it's an easy fix: create two categories of assignments and say students have

to complete a minimum of X number of assignments in the "small" category. Similar to a contract.) How can I make more opportunities for students to give feedback to each other, and also opportunities for me to give more variety of feedback? How can I better deal with attendance issues, of which there were a lot this term? (The P/NP seemed to make students assume they didn't need to come to class except occasionally. It was ruinous to the group dynamics, and students acknowledged that it was ruinous, but that didn't stop them from thinking that attending class was basically optional.) How can I increase students' excitement for the work and decrease their feeling that they're just doing this so they can become IDS majors and then go off and do the things that actually interest them?

All good questions, some of which I have nascent answers for, some of which continue to stump me. But that's why we keep teaching, isn't it? Because one day, if we work hard enough, we might actually get this stuff right…

—December 2018

Afterword (2025)

I considered editing this piece down to make it more direct and more efficiently expressed, but in attempting to do so, I realized that the value here is in the hemming and hawing and wondering and thinking aloud. One of the things we don't do enough as teachers is make our process of thinking visible. This is hard stuff, with no easy answers, requiring lots of trial and error. This kind of thinking is also the work of teaching, and it is labor that deserves to be known.

Eventually, I got rid of the "greenlight" approach for grading because it was achieving more noise than not. For some reason, I just never seemed to find a way to explain it to students so that it became more useful than not for the majority of them. I fell back on my old mantra: *when it comes to grading, simplify, simplify, simplify*.

But also diversify. A couple years after I first wrote this piece, I led a curriculum change for the program, moving us from 3 credits to 4 credits and splitting our intro course into two 2-credit courses, one in the first half of the term, one in the second. Two of those three courses (Foundations of Interdisciplinary Studies and Senior Seminar) don't need any sort of complex grading at all. The other course, which is open to all majors (not just IDS), Lifelong Learning Lab, needs something else. I struggled with figuring out a good grading system for that course until my colleague Elm Forge taught it during a time when I had some course release for my role as president of our faculty union. Elm did something clever: she created a familiar A through F scale, including brief descriptions of what those grades meant numbers-wise in our learning management system grade report, and then indicated that grades of C- or above equal a P and grade below C- equal NP. This solved a few problems at once. First, in a half-term course there's no way to deprogram students from the grading system they've lived in their entire academic lives. For all its many faults, A through F is familiar. Also, using our learning management system (Canvas) gives students a familiar way to check their work and turn in assignments. I don't love it, and in Senior Seminar in particular I move away from it, but for our two low-level, half-term courses, it's not worth the fight of ditching the LMS. (Choose your battles!) I've lost many hours trying to get Canvas to handle P/NP grades, with a certain amount of success, but it still does 0–100 and A–F most easily. Elm's solution saves us all time and confusion.

Finally, I'll note that when I interviewed for the tenure-track version of my job, there was a student meet-and-greet (a bit odd, since I was their teacher and advisor, but I was just one of a bunch of candidates for the position) and the best question

I got came from one of our top students, a graduating senior. She said she had been having trouble keeping motivated on her term-long capstone project for Senior Seminar and kept pushing it aside to work on assignments for her traditionally-graded courses. Would I, she wondered, consider changing the grading system of our courses away from P/NP?

I don't remember exactly how I responded, but I said something to the effect of, "I don't see your situation as a problem for the course. You're making decisions based on the amount of time, energy, and interest that you have. You're weighing the pros and cons. You're making free choices. If your work for our course ends up being merely adequate, the kind of work that might get a C in a traditionally-graded course, then you've learned that you need some sort of external reward to be able to do your best work — and that's valuable to know about yourself. I honestly don't say that in judgment. We all get motivation in different ways, from different stimuli. Your knowledge of yourself, gained from your frustration with this course, may in fact be the best thing you could possibly learn from our course! And I'm totally happy with that, for you and for the course. So no, I would not be tempted to change it. That's P/NP doing exactly what it should do, in my opinion."

She replied by asking if it was fair that she, working not at her fullest capacity, should get the same grade as a student who puts in huge amounts of effort. I said something like: "That's life. That's how the world works. We're all different human beings, some of us doing particular tasks quickly and easily, some not, some doing them with great care, some not. What matters is what you do and what you learn, because it's *your* education, not somebody else's, just as your peers' education is theirs, not yours. We all end up learning very different things from the courses we take. My job as the teacher who submits grades is to assess whether the core goals are met or not. It's really that simple. Everything else — all the best and worst stuff of education — lives beyond that, beyond grades."

Did that satisfy her? Probably not. But it remains even now what I believe.

When It's Fun to Grade

This morning I was grading work for a 2-credit, half-semester course I teach called Lifelong Learning Laboratory. While going from one assignment to the next, I suddenly realized I was having an emotion I don't usually associate with grading: joy. It was legitimately fun to see what the students had created.

If you are a teacher or have friends who are teachers, your social media feeds may now and then fill with complaints from folks, especially at exam times, about the drudgery of grading. There's a perennially popular *McSweeney's* piece by Robin Lee Mozer from 2016 called "I Would Rather Do Anything Else Than Grade Your Final Papers".[1] Grading tends to bring out many emotions, few of them ever good. Some of my most painful experiences in life involve grading: the agony of massive piles of papers to get through, the disappointment of realizing an entire class has apparently paid no attention to anything I've tried to teach them, the angry heartbreak at discovering plagiarism. I shiver with memories of grading.

It's not just the work of grading dozens of students that wears us down; there is also the wearying power of sitting in judgment. Some people perhaps are energized by that position, but for me, and I think quite a few of my colleagues, the work of assessing and evaluating is itself exhausting and dispiriting. I know that one model of teaching sees the teacher as the person who judges *how well* someone has learned something, and

[1] Available online at https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/i-would-rather-do-anything-else-than-grade-your-final-papers

certainly such evaluation is sometimes necessary — but for me the place of joy in teaching has nothing to do with that and everything to do with my joy in sharing knowledge and experience. Really, that's the reason I got into this job, not to be a judge or cop. Sharing knowledge and learning together is fun; indeed, it's one of the things that gets me up in the morning. (Along with my alarm clock!)

I'm lucky these days to teach all Pass/No Pass courses and to work in a program that encourages ungrading. I have built most of the activities in my courses around the idea of students having experiences rather than students needing to be judged. They do good work and bad work, amazing work and disappointing work, but the ultimate goal is less that I will stand in judgment about the work's quality than that I will try to guide the students to assess that quality for themselves and then decide what to carry forward from the experience of doing the work: what learning do they want to hold onto and remember ten days or ten years from now, what do they want to think about doing differently in the future, what are they proud of, what do they know they could do better, what kept them from doing their best this time?

Lifelong Learning Lab is a particularly special course, one of the weirdest and most experimental at the entire university. It's relatively new and I'm still figuring out how to make it work best. Last term, it was awful. The previous term had been pretty good because of a particularly strong group of students, and I didn't recognize some huge pedagogical flaws in the course because the strength of the students that term bridged the flaws. The course is based in ideas of Open Pedagogy, and the mistakes I had made with the design of the course all boiled down to not being brave enough with the openness. I had kept too many of the conventional features of a typical course students would take, and so while the particularly energized group had done well at seizing the open opportunities and running with them, the more "normal" group of students did a perfectly

rational thing: they expected a traditional course, gravitated toward the traditional elements, and pretty much missed the entire point of the class. It really wasn't their fault. It was mine for not creating an environment in which they had to engage with the course and each other in a more autonomous way. I had myself fallen too easily into the role of Teacher.

This time, to prevent this from the very beginning, I did not show up to the first class. Instead, students arrived to a message on the board and a bit.ly link to a webpage of explanations, including a video of me briefly assuring them this was how things were supposed to go. Their job was to break into groups to figure out a variety of things, including the learning goals for our course, both the ones in our syllabus and ones they would like to add themselves. I assured them that I was downstairs in my office and they should send a representative to get me once they were done.

It would have been fun to have been a fly on the wall that morning. I sat in my office that morning filled with anxiety. Would the students see the bit.ly link on the board? Would they seize the moment or just give up? Would they all just leave? Would they hate the experience? Soon enough, two students came down to get me, and seemed none the worse for anything. They were a bit earlier than I had planned, but I also had no idea how long the activities would take. In our debriefing conversation, they seemed to have really understood what we were doing. I was able to clarify some things about the work that were, indeed, unclear in my written explanations.

The heart of the course is a menu of projects students can choose from. To pass the course, they need to turn in 100 points worth of projects. Like the course, the projects are pass/no pass. If they aren't adequate, they have to be revised to earn the points. There are no gradations of points: it's all or nothing. I've been pretty liberal with the projects because it's

our first time with them in this form (we did them a bit differently before) and the point is not to have great final products but rather to have good learning experiences.

We're in the last week of classes, so a lot of projects have come in recently. Normally, this feels burdensome. The drudgery of grading. But this time it's been fun to see how the students interpreted the often quite open (deliberately vague) guidelines and tailored the projects to their own interests and skills. None of them so far have been earthshaking, but all of them have shown the students thinking in interesting ways, exploring, experimenting. Next week, during our final exam period, we'll do a reflection activity to bring it all together and, I hope, solidify the learning and give each student something to take forward into other classes and life.

One of the reasons the grading this time is for me joyful is because I feel less like a judge than an appreciator. I have repeatedly told the students to think of the course as basically show and tell. My feedback to them is almost entirely made up of comments such as, "Neat! I would never have thought of interpreting the assignment this way. I really enjoyed seeing what you did with it." This is honest feedback. Being able to step away from the role of Judge (and Jury and sometimes Executioner) and to step into the role of Receiver and Appreciator makes grading a vastly more pleasant and even exciting activity.

The ways we grade students can be invisibly disempowering. I've known this ever since I was in high school and first read the work of Theodore Sizer and Paulo Freire (yes, I was a weird kid; this was my way out of the misery of school — imagining better schooling). But the insight is continually reinforced whenever I try to help students think of school work in new ways. This term, it was most apparent in our smallest project opportunity: for 5 points, students could do a "random act of kindness". I thought of this as a simple way for them to

get 5 points if they ended up with 95 instead of 100 at the end of the term.

This proved to be the most confusing assignment for most students. I did not predict that. The challenge seemed to be that it's *an assignment*. "What would count?" they asked. "Do something random and kind…?" I said, a bit perplexed. "What is random?" they asked. "What is kind?" they asked. "Who judges?" they asked.

Interestingly, a lot of their ideas ended up having to do with money — buying something for someone. This isn't in and of itself bad, and led to some fun stuff (random flowers for a mentor; tipping a waiter 100%), but I worry about how transactional it is. It's as if by spending money they felt more assured that they were doing something of worth. I wasn't prepared for this because I did not expect this particular option to be the one to cause the most confusion, but I will prepare for it next term and try to encourage the students to think about kindness more broadly, less transactionally. (They did appreciate the idea at the end that part of what we can use our time to do is bring some goodness into the world. They very much got that. But having it as an assignment made it feel somehow weird. Something to work on.)

I began experimenting with nontraditional forms of grading back when I was an English teacher and finally reached a point where I realized I was creating all sorts of misery for myself. Who assigned all this horrible work that I had to grade?! Oh, it was me. So many of my grading miseries were self-inflicted. I began to adjust my assignments, always keeping the course goals in mind but beginning to ask, "What do I actually *want* to grade?" Sometimes, drudgery is unavoidable. Sometimes, content just has to be learned, tested, and assessed to be able to move to more interesting and engaging experiences. The problem for me was that I wasn't giving my students and myself ways to move on to those more interesting and engaging experiences. The content had become the be-all and end-all,

when really the content needed to be a waystation along a greater path. Memorization for its own sake is no fun, dealing with a bunch of fiddly details just to deal with details is no fun. But if those tasks are part of a bigger goal, then they can at least be bearable.

Content is not at all the point of Lifelong Learning Lab, thankfully, so I am even more free to play around with the pedagogy. Yes, I want students to be able to speak with some knowledge about interdisciplinarity and about higher education, and there's definitely still a ways to go in finding good ways to get them there, but one of my basic goals for the course of helping students break down social barriers, learn to work together, and take some steps toward seeing their education as something of their own are goals we made real strides toward this term. And I got to have some fun grading the work as they made their way toward those goals.

The course still has a ways to go to become what I would like it to be, but at least the students are having some fun with the work, and their fun is now my fun as I receive and appreciate that work.

—May 2023

Afterword (2026)

Lifelong Learning Lab continues to be a fascinating, challenging, frustrating course. That spring 2023 term was an especially good group of students. Later terms did not go as well as this one, and I have now abandoned most of the practices I described in this chapter. The biggest problem was just that once more students from majors other than Interdisciplinary Studies started taking it, and some younger students could take the course for General Education credits, I needed to add more structure and scaffolding, because in a 2-credit, half-term course you can't undo all the training of their previous years of education. Always, we have to start where students are, and a lot of the students in the course now arrive programmed for a highly traditional educational experience. Small things blow their minds and challenge their ideas of what education might be and do. This, too, is valuable.

My goal with the course now is for it to provide to the students an opportunity for liberation. It is really not a course about itself, it is a course that I hope will prepare students to be more thoughtful, creative, and free in their future courses. And every term I seem to change my mind about how we might do that…

New Educations

1.

I survived high school by reading books about education. My mother worked at the local college and was using her tuition benefit to do an M.Ed. Often, I accompanied her to the library.

High school was tough for me for all sorts of reasons, not least being that I just wanted to be an adult. I had hated being a child and I hated being a teenager even more, because being a teenager meant being on the cusp of adulthood without any of the benefits. My favorite people were adults, the books I read were about adults, and everything I wanted to do in life — such as move to New York City and become a writer or an actor or a theatre director — was the province of adults. High school felt like an obstacle.

Certain books gave me hope. At the library, I discovered classics of the 1960s and early '70s: John Holt's *How Children Fail*, Paul Goodman's *Compulsory Miseducation*, Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society*, and William Glasser's *Schools without Failure*. I devoured these books, less for their individual prescriptions than for their overall message that schooling as I knew it was terrible and that it didn't have to be that way. (My mother handed me her library copy of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, but it was too abstract for me. I didn't have enough understanding of the world to understand Freire's writing. I returned to it in my senior year as an

undergraduate, and by then I was ready. Freire's work has been important to me ever since.) Later, I took an elective class called something like "Resistance and Rebellion" and we were assigned a photocopied excerpt from Jonathan Kozol's *The Night Is Dark and I Am Far from Home*, which soon obsessed me, and on my next trip to Boston, I found a copy of the book in a new edition at the giant Waterstones bookstore on the corner of Newbury and Essex Streets, and I bought it, even though I rarely bought new books (too expensive), and I remember not so much reading it as devouring it. Soon after, someone gave me (or maybe I got it for a birthday or Christmas present) a hardcover copy of Theodore Sizer's *Horace's School: Redesigning the American High School*, which I carried around like a bible.

Those were exciting days. Reading about how education could be different eased my life as a student not because the books changed my own schooling — they didn't — but because they let me imagine what might be possible. From then on, I wanted to be a teacher, because I wanted to try to put into practice some of what I had imagined.

2.

Cathie N. Davidson's *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux* brought me back to how I felt in high school when reading those books about education. I'm about to begin my 20th year as a teacher (first of high school, now college), and a lot of my youthful idealism got scraped off along the way. But *The New Education* reminded me that the idealism, though lacerated and scarred, isn't gone, and I'm now in a position to put a at least a few small dreams into action.

I read *The New Education* so quickly and energetically the first time that I'm now going back over it more carefully, because most of the details have slipped away from my memory,

even though my first reading was only a few months ago. On that first reading, I couldn't let the book go — I read well into the night, long past when I normally go to bed. It was a book I needed desperately, but hadn't known I needed until I opened it up and read the first few pages.

"Right now," Davidson writes, "Redesigning higher education demands institutional restructuring, a revolution in every classroom, curriculum, and assessment system. It means refocusing away from the passive student to the whole person learning new ways of thinking through problems with no easy solutions. It shifts the goal of college from fulfilling course and graduation requirements to learning for success in the world after college. It means testing learning in serious and thoughtful ways, so that students take charge of what and how they know, how they collaborate, how they respond to feedback, and how they grow."

This is a vision of truly student-centered learning.

3.

One of the effects of some of my more negative experiences of educational innovation has been to make me skeptical about the term *student-centered learning*. So often in my experience, if that term has not been a vague, feel-good label, then it has been a term for marketing to students, seeing them fundamentally as customers or consumers. I want nothing to do with any such framing. Education is not a retail operation.

My favorite chapter in *The New Education* is the second, titled "College for Everyone", about what 4-year schools can learn from community colleges. Fundamentally, it's a chapter about what it means to be *truly* student-centered. "The infrastructure of the research university is based on exclusion, sorting, selecting, and ranking: the infrastructure of the community college is based on inclusion, remediating, improving, and offering first chances — and second, third, or

however many are required for success. … In community college, virtually everyone is admitted, and the task is not for the student to replicate the expertise of the professor but, rather, for the student to gain the basic literacies required to move ahead."

Davidson ties this to community colleges' open admissions systems: "When your mission is to accept everyone, everything else about your institution has to support every student's success. This means low tuition and fees, access to financial aid, academic flexibility and variety, basic literacy and numeracy training, basic language and cultural training (including for immigrants), specialized skills-training opportunities based on the specific and up-to-date occupational requirements of a local community, professional certifications to augment traditional degrees and diplomas, personalized attention (with an emphasis on advising and small class size), extracurricular components, and online course offerings to supplement local courses and offer flexibility to those juggling the demands of school, jobs, and home life."

And then the kicker: "The community college is set up to focus on the student — not the professor, not the profession, not the discipline, all of which are central to the status of the research university."

In this formulation, the research university is — pretty much by definition — institution-centered. It cannot truly be student-centered. When in conflict, the needs of the institution, the professors, and the disciplines will always end up trumping the needs of the students.

That formulation is not necessarily a criticism of research universities. There is something to be said for joining in the shared endeavor of an institution. There is something to be said for wondering, "What can I bring to this place, this system?" rather than "What can this place, this system do for me?" As a society, we need both. As individuals, we probably also

need both: a student-centered system to help individuals learn how to learn and an institution/discipline-centered system that can then both focus and magnify the efforts of people who have developed confidence and individuality as learners.

The difference may be that student-centered systems need teachers, while institution/discipline-centered systems need managers and participants. Of course, I don't mean *teachers* in the sense of people who simply convey knowledge — managers and participants can do that just fine, too — but rather people who are experienced in training people to learn for themselves.

Maybe *teachers* is the wrong word here.

Maybe I mean *liberators*.

4.

I've been reading around in Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (trans. Kristin Ross), an odd and often frustrating book, but a provocative one nonetheless. It tells the story of Joseph Jacotot, who hit upon his educational method when, supposedly, he taught French to Flemish students who spoke no French and he no Flemish. The details of all this, and the meanings and implications for philosophy and politics, I will leave aside.

What sticks with me from *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is this early passage:

> Joseph Jacotot applied himself to varying the experiment, to repeating on purpose what chance had once produced. He began to teach two subjects at which he was notably incompetent: painting and the piano. Law students would have liked him to be given a vacant chair in their faculty. But the University of Louvain was already worried about this extravagant lecturer, for whom students were deserting the magisterial courses, in favor of

> coming, evenings, to crowd into a much too small room, lit by only two candles, in order to hear: "I must teach you that I have nothing to teach you." The authority they consulted thus responded that he saw no point in calling this teaching. Jacotot was experimenting, precisely, with the gap between accreditation and act. Rather than teaching a law course in French, he taught the students to litigate in Flemish. They litigated very well, but he still didn't know Flemish.[1]

That passage reads like a fable or a parable. Perhaps it is. Yes, I think it is.

I must teach you that I have nothing to teach you.

(I'm tempted to put that sentence at the top of my syllabi.)

There is much *work* in teaching you that I have nothing to teach you. All of our systems and expectations are designed otherwise. Decades of experience as both student and teacher lead me to think it is my job to teach my students, and it is their job to learn. That is the most comfortable position for many people, teachers and students both, but as countless progressive educators have pointed out for centuries, it is not a liberating vision.

We must, then, disabuse ourselves. We must unlearn to learn.

5.

Jacotot began from an assumption that everyone is equally intelligent and that everyone has the capacity to teach themselves. Rather than wanting to argue these assumptions, I find myself wanting to play what Peter Elbow calls "the believing game" — what are the implications if we assume these ideas are

[1] Ranciere, *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 14-15.

absolutely true? Would they strengthen our pedagogy or dilute it?

This brings us back to Cathy Davidson's ideas about learning from community colleges. *When your mission is to accept everyone…*

It may not be possible, or even desirable, for all our schools to accept such a mission, but perhaps we as teachers should imagine how accepting the mission might shape our everyday practice of teaching and learning.

Note

I first learned of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* from Adam Kotsko's essay "The Courage to Be Ignorant" (published in *Inside Higher Ed*), which is well worth reading.[2]

—August 2018

[2] Available at https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2013/12/03/essay-value-teaching-outside-your-area-expertise

The Grindr Model of Higher Education

He is the corporate Silence: dread him not!
No power hath he of evil in himself…

—Edgar Allan Poe[1]

Reading Sean Michael Morris's blog post "On Silence: Humanizing Digital Pedagogy", I am struck by the anecdote he begins with, about returning to the dating scene for the first time since it went digital, an anecdote that leads to a discussion about the way we read presence and silence via technology.[2]

I think about a novel I just read: *Alone* by Thomas Moore, in which a character wonders, "Has Grindr killed psychic gay powers?"

In a post for Dennis Cooper's blog about *Alone*, Moore ends with a chart/graph/thing showing Bartholomew's two-dimensional model of attachment: the positive quadrant (secure,

[1] Poe, "Silence", https://poets.org/poem/silence-4

[2] This blog post is no longer available. My use of it in this essay, though, doesn't seem to me to require knowledge of the original, since I'm taking one of Sean's ideas and improvising around it.

self-confident, comfortable with intimacy, etc.), the semi-positive quadrant (dismissive, but self-assured), the semi-negative (pre-occupied, overly invested), the negative (fearful!).[3]

Psychic gay powers. Two-dimensional attachment. What is graphed as positive, what is graphed as negative…

(As someone whose ideal of a date is mailing handwritten letters back and forth across at least 3,000 miles, I suppose I fall into the attachment quadrant coded as semi-positive and titled Dismissive. *Dismissive* is, indeed, the right description of how I feel about the dating scene, especially as a middle-aged queer. I have added and deleted Grindr plenty over the years, at best finding it vaguely amusing, mostly finding it horrifying. Why, I wonder, would I ever want to connect with a guy in that way, with that tool?!)

Attachment. Dismissive. Psychic gay powers killed…

I think of my friend Richard Larson's review of the new book *Gay Bar* for *Harvard Review*:

> The gay bar I'd once escaped to as a teenager, armed with a fake ID and the need to outrun the stranglehold of the closet, is now a ruin. A friend from adolescence recently texted me a video of what it looks like now, and at first I didn't recognize it as the refuge it had been. A shaky camera moves through the darkness; it catches glimpses of wood scraps and cinderblocks haphazardly piled up, trash strewn everywhere. A TV appears, cracked open and lying on its side, which I remember had once hung high up on the wall, always playing vintage pornography. For me at the time, the bar was aspirational, representative of a future I wanted for myself outside of the closet. But as Atherton Lin also recalls

[3] "Please welcome to the world … Alone by Thomas Moore (Amphetamine Sulphate)", DC's: The Blog of Author Dennis Cooper, 13 June 2020: https://denniscooperblog.com/please-welcome-to-the-world-alone-by-thomas-moore-amphetamine-sulphate/.

> wondering, when perusing zines from the same era, it's likely that the actors in those old videos I was watching were already dead.[4]

(I think of my own experience of gay bars, many over the years, good and bad, positive and negative. The good memories are like this: In Provincetown, hanging out with lesbian friends, fascinated by how fascinated they are by the gay male porn on the corner tv. I chuckle at the memory now and imagine friends have sometimes said of me, with exasperation, "Take him to a bar and instead of chatting up guys, he'll start analyzing the cultural practices of lesbians." While not the whole truth, I would be lying if I said this characterization were untrue.)

(But also: the sense of refuge. While I have had unsatisfying, boring, annoying experiences in gay bars, I have only once or twice felt unsafe there, only once truly *been* unsafe, and I never blame the gay bar as a scene for that. The outside world often feels unsafe. Sometimes, the safest I have ever felt has been in gay bars. In fact, were I asked to list the times I have felt most safe in my life, probably half the moments on the list would be in gay bars.)

(I never felt safe on Grindr.)

Sean Michael Morris writes about the thing everybody who invokes the name of Paolo Freire writes about, the "Banking Model of Education", and I begin to wonder: What is the Grindr Model of Education?

In the Grindr Model of Education, everybody has to create a self and move through education as that self. In the Grindr Model of Education, we are all, teachers and students, selling ourselves to each other — not necessarily for cash, but we are

[4] Larson, Richard Scott, and Jeremy Atherton Lin. "Gay Bar: Why We Went Out." *Harvard Review* Online, June 1, 2021. https://www.harvardreview.org/book-review/gay-bar-why-we-went-out/.

selling our bodies and our desires. In the Grindr Model of Education, we are all bodies, even though we are virtual, because though our bodies may be fictional, may be avatars, nonetheless it is bodies — or the idea of bodies, the dream of bodies — that matter. In the Grindr Model of Education, proximity may help us achieve our ultimate goal of escaping the virtual and putting our bodies together. In the Grindr Model of Education, everything we do has the goal of getting our bodies together.

(Grindr is a two-dimensional model of attachment.)

Sean Michael Morris writes about silence, about how easy it is to misread silence on Grindr and how easy it is to misread silence in a classroom or via Zoom.

I wonder: can we ever not misread silence? Is any reading of silence not a destruction of silence? Is silence readable? Can there be a silent explanation of silence? (And by *silence* I don't mean simply not talking or not hearing. I mean not communicating. The absence of communication.)

Is silence data? Does Grindr sell my silence, or is my silence the one way I can refuse, on Grindr, the marketplace of desire?

Is silence the same as swiping away what (who) I don't desire?

Reading silence feels to me as difficult as proving a negative.

"Silence, in the banking model of education," Sean Michael Morris writes, "would most likely indicate either incomprehension or rebellion on the part of the student." This seems true to me, and indicates the problem with any model of education, whether Banking or Grindr: models impose meaning. They may allow, or even demand, meaning-making, but before they get there, they start from assumptions about what things mean, how they mean, and how they should mean, how they can mean. This is not inherently bad. Even a blank canvas has boundaries: edges, obviously, but also the material that it is:

canvas, which, like its corporate LMS namesake Canvas, holds some things and not others.

Education demands the student's presence, the student's engagement, the student's participation, the student's meaning-making — all of which are opposed to silence (and its cousin, absence). Education is, at a very basic level, about the elimination of lacunae, the filling of holes and gaps and silences. *To be silenced* is a terrible effect of power, a core authoritarian move. To choose silence for oneself, though…?

How can one *be silent* in an educational setting?

Here, we arrive at Bartleby the Scrivener. Silence as polite refusal. Polite, but devastating. Always preferring not to, you get to a place where there is nothing left to do, even if you find your way to the dead letter office. In the end, you must simply refuse to breathe, refuse to live. Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!

(Perhaps I should download Grindr again and change my screen-name to Bartleby.)

(I would prefer not to.)

The Grindr Model of Education is very ed-tech. Grindr and ed-tech are all about hookups.

Grindr is a Yearning Management System.

"How do we learn to reach out across the silence, through the screen, and change the way we teach?" Sean Michael Morris asks. Students who don't live in the silence are secure, but that's only one quadrant. What of the dismissive students, the preoccupied students, the fearful students? Should we force them out of the silence? Must they get attached?

The problem with Grindr is the problem with any LMS or any tech tool or any other attachment theory (tech is an attachment theory) — the theory (every theory) has ideas of positive and negative, healthy and harmful built in. Silence is bad because it is not engagement. Dismissiveness is bad because downplaying the importance of intimate relationships is bad,

"compulsive" self-reliance is bad, "distance" in relationships is bad.

Here's one thing I can tell you for sure: the graph/ chart/ thing of Attachment Theory is not Buddhist. Because a Buddhist would be tempted to call that lower left quadrant not "Dismissive" but "Enlightened". After all, Buddhist attachment theory is simple: attachment is bad.

I look again at the quadrants, particularly at my own, the Dismissive, and I think, dismissively: Good luck, buddy. If your tech is a gay bar, maybe I'll hang out, but if you're trying to get me to return to Grindr, no way. Send me a handwritten letter, then maybe one day we'll talk, especially if you remain 3,000 miles away. (Here's some sexxxy talk: *Be my dead letter office.*) I may "downplay the importance of intimate relationships", but why should I trust you that intimate relationships are worthwhile, when all they seem to do is cause you misery and angst and money? How do you know that I haven't found the best way forward, the least oppressive? Maybe your security, so positive and supported by cultural norms, is chutzpah and self-delusion. Let me Zen my way forward.

The Grindr Model of Education commodifies desire into surveillance capital. While it announces nodes of desire near you and opens paths of communication, it also imposes something of a culture, as all models do. Grindr is a consolidation of desire: it collects it, transmits it, but also regulates how it gets expressed, received, interpreted. Technology may sell itself as cultureless and valueless, but it is exactly the opposite, because no tech exists in silence. The tool gets used, and as it gets used, it accumulates meanings, expectations, desires of its own.

The Gay Bar Model of Education is one I am maybe more interested in. You can sit in a corner of a gay bar in silence. (I've done it!) People will approach, they'll check in with you, they'll take your drink orders, maybe chat you up, but you own your silence there, at least at the good bars, the friendly ones. And there are lots of different types of gay bars, too. (Or, once upon

a time, before Grindr, there were.) Ones you can bring your lesbian friends to to watch porn, ones that are all about drag, ones where everybody wears leather, ones where the preppies go for overpriced cocktails, and ones that are just good places for rumpled middle-aged queers to hang out for a bit and feel safe.

If your model of education is too much like Grindr, is there some way you might make it more like a gay bar? Can your model of education resuscitate gay psychic powers?

—June 2021

FOUR

What Price Academic Books?

Years ago, Amazon included bookmarks with their orders, and one of the bookmarks offered a loose translation of Erasmus: "When I get a little money I buy books; and if any is left I buy food and clothes." I've more or less lived my life by similar principles. (I bought some clothes this summer when I got a new job because I realized the best work trousers I had were completely frayed at the bottom and thin at the knees.) If I am reasonably certain that the book is of value to me, then I am also willing to spend more money on a book than I expect the average consumer is. Such spending is relatively rare, but it does happen — for instance, I bought, and have never regretted buying, copies of the Cambridge Edition of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Years* when I found them, at different times, on sale for substantially less than their very high retail prices (I bought them for at least 50% off each — but these are books priced closed to $200 each, so even a big discount ends with a high price).

When it comes to books I value, I am willing to spend more than most people. Here are some books I own that are published by academic presses, along with their current [February 2019] US retail prices and, if available, the price of their Kindle edition, since I have a Kindle and often prefer to buy academic books for it so that they are easy to highlight, annotate, and search:

- *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf (Cambridge, $163)
- *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, vol. 4 (Cambridge, $49.99)
- *Virginia Woolf's Modernist Path* by Barbara Lounsberry (Florida, $24.95 / K: $23.70)
- *Stuart Hall: Selected Political Writings* (Duke, $27.95 / K: $15.37)
- *On Joanna Russ* (Wesleyan, $29.95 / K: $23.99)
- *About Writing* by Samuel R. Delany (Wesleyan, $29.95 / K: $14.39)
- *Mobile Subjects: Transnational Imaginaries of Gender Reassignment* by Aren Z. Aizura (Duke, $25.95 / K: $15.31)
- *Why They Can't Write* by John Warner (Johns Hopkins, $27.95 / K: $18.49)
- *The Book of Minor Perverts* by Benjamin Kahan (Chicago, $30 / K: $16.50)
- *Forget English!: Orientalisms & World Literature* by Aamir R. Mufti (Harvard, $22.95 / K: $19.99)
- *The Universe of Things* by Steven Shaviro (Minnesota, $20 / K: $12.49)
- various books in the U Minnesota Press Forerunners series, $7.95 each, ebooks $4.95

Here, in contrast, are books I've had my eye on for some time but have not bought:

- *The Slow Philosophy of J.M. Coetzee* (Bloomsbury, $103.50 / K: $70.20)
- *Out of Context: The Uses of Modernist Fiction* by Michaela Bronstein (Oxford, $74.00 / K: $70.30)
- *The Modernist Art of Queer Survival* by Benjamin Bateman (Oxford, $65 / K: $51.99)
- *Minor Characters Have Their Day: Genre and the Contemporary Literary Marketplace* by Jeremy Rosen (Columbia, $60 / K: $57)
- *Writing "Out of All the Camps": J.M. Coetzee's Narratives of Displacement* by Laura Wright (Routledge, $59.95 / K: $49.76)

That second list could be longer, but there's no need. The contrast is clear, and if you are someone who occasionally buys academic books, you are familiar with what I'm trying to show here.

(I'm not going to offer any conclusions or exhortations. I don't know a whole lot about the behind-the-scenes of academic publishing's marketing and sales. Publishers know their business. If Cambridge could make back the investment on their Woolf editions by selling them for the same price as they sell the volumes of Beckett letters, I assume they would. If they did that, I'd buy the whole set of Woolf books, and I'm sure quite a few Woolfians — and librarians — would too, because they are exquisite. Cambridge's pricing seems absurd and self-defeating to me, but I have no knowledge of the budgets or marketing on those books.)

Average price of the books on the list of books I have bought, including the exorbitantly-priced Woolf volume (but not the Forerunners series): $39.87.

Average price of the second list, the books I have not bought and am unlikely to buy at their current price, despite desiring them: $72.49.

Most of the books on the first list are paperbacks (but not all: the Beckett letters and *Why They Can't Write* are both hardcovers), most of the books on the second list are hardcovers (but not all: Laura Wright's book is a $60 paperback). I did not pay full retail price for all of the books on the first list; in most cases, in fact, I bought them when some sort of deal was available, usually a 30%-off deal from the publisher when the book was new, as such discounts are relatively common. Even with 30% off, I would be unlikely to buy the books on the second list, because most of the prices are still so high.

After years of buying books, I know my own personal thresholds:

- I will buy paperbacks I'm strongly curious about if they're under $30; if I really know I want them.
- I will buy hardcovers I'm strongly curious about if they're under $30; if I really know I want them (e.g. Beckett's letters), I'll go up to about $50.
- Except for extreme circumstances, I will never pay more than $20 for an ebook. (Extreme circumstances = I need access right now because I'm working on an important, and probably remunerative, project for which it is vital.) When I was working on my dissertation, I needed *The Slow Philosophy of J.M. Coetzee* and had to return it to the library, as it was an interlibrary loan and I had maxed out the renewals. I got lucky: for whatever reason, the Kindle was on sale for $17.01. I would not, under any circumstances, have paid the current price of $70.20. I would have done everything I could do to reduce reference to the book in my dissertation, and would have interlibrary loaned it again if I couldn't reduce the references.

As I said above, I'm probably something of an oddity, even among academics, in the priority of books in my economic life. I've also got more disposable income than most people — little debt, good health, no children, a middle-class salary. Most people's thresholds are probably lower than mine.

(I also buy rare and collectible books, but what I'm willing to spend is hugely variable and depends on the book and my finances at the time of purchase. I live a frugal life otherwise, so occasionally indulge in rare books, though not books so rare that I'm afraid to handle them or have them out in the open. I think of them with a term a librarian once offered me: *medium-rare books*.)

Obviously, the books in the second list are not priced for sales to individuals. They're supposed to be bought by institutions, particularly libraries, which, in theory at least, have much bigger budgets than individuals do for bookbuying. The

general practice at many academic publishers is: release an expensive hardcover for the library market, then release a less expensive paperback a year or two later. But that's not always the case. Some of the presses I most frequently buy books from — Minnesota, Duke, Wesleyan — usually release paperbacks at the same time they release library hardcovers (if they do hardcovers at all).

What I find most striking are some of the Kindle prices. I don't understand the expensive Kindle editions. Who is the market? Who pays $70 (or more!) for an ebook? Jeff Bezos? Some publishers don't even sell a Kindle or EPUB edition; all you can get is a PDF full of digital-right-management locks on it bought from the publisher's website for $50 or even $100. I cannot imagine anybody buys these. They are priced specifically *not* to sell.

Argue the value of ebooks all you want, but most of us who buy them are not willing to pay the same amount we would for a paperback, and certainly not the same we would for a hardcover. Ebooks feel ethereal, disposable. (Yes, Amazon has seriously hindered the ebook market by making consumers see anything above $10 as expensive, but there are plenty of others factors at play.) Because I find reading ebooks less appealing than reading physical books, they have taken the place of the old mass-market paperbacks for me. In non-academic books, mostly what I read in ebooks are mystery novels, horror novels, and short stories. Almost always, I wait for sales that bring the price down to $2.99 or less.

However, with academic books, ebooks do serve more of a purpose, since, as I said above, the highlighting, annotating, and search functions are truly useful. So I'm perfectly willing to go up to about $20 for an academic book I'm likely to use for my work, maybe $25 for one that I know I'm going to use a lot. But that's it. I don't think I've ever paid more than $25 for an

ebook, and rarely more than $10. I can't imagine I'm an anomaly. In fact, I expect I'm willing to pay more for academic ebooks than most readers are.

The market for academic books is changing, just as the market for everything is changing. Publishers like Duke, Minnesota, and a few others dominate my shelves because they offer paperbacks at reasonable prices. I do not have easy access to a huge, wealthy academic library from which to borrow the latest academic publication priced at $1 per page. More and more libraries don't have the kind of funding for book purchases that they once had. Many have moved to renting ebooks via expensive subscriptions, a choice that may be unavoidable, but which renders libraries subservient to the whims of the publishers.

Academic publishing must change. It may be serving the needs of owners and stockholders, but more often than not it does not serve the needs of the audience it is supposed to exist for: readers and scholars. You and me.

—February 2019

Why They Can't Write
by John Warner

1.

For a couple years now, I've made it a point to read John Warner's blog at *Inside Higher Ed* at least every few weeks, and often much more frequently than that — indeed, these days, I pretty much click over there immediately whenever I learn of a new post. Warner's writings have been central to changes I've made in my pedagogy, particularly regarding grading. Thus, his new book *Why They Can't Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities* was one I rushed to get.

Even if I hadn't known Warner's work before, the subtitle would have been a siren call to me. When I began teaching a couple decades ago, I began as a high school teacher, and five-paragraph essays were all the rage. I hated them. I didn't just hate them for what they were, but for what they stood for: a thoughtless prescription for the most mediocre of mediocre writing, a favorite assignment of teachers who didn't have a whole lot of confidence in their own writing skills and so relied on a formula, an offense against everything I ever cherished in writing (invention, serendipity, play, surprise). I was passionate in my hatred in a way common to young crusaders. I told students that whoever first created the five-paragraph essay must have been a drunk, because who else would want you to

tell them what you're going to tell them, lay it out in three paragraphs, then tell them what you told them? (This statement came back to me when another teacher at the school, a good friend of mine, said one of her students had accused her of being a stupid drunk because she liked five-paragraph essays…)

These days, I honestly don't have that big a problem with five-paragraph essays if they're simply used as a tool for exploring one type of structure that is, in fact, useful to some writing tasks. The structure is unexciting, but common. (Many academic articles seem to be based on the premises of the five-paragraph essay, even if they've got many more paragraphs. This is not, though, a ringing endorsement; many academic essays are shallow, overlong, and painfully repetitive.) The idea of killing that assignment is a good one for Warner's subtitle, though, because it helps us understand his goal with the book: to seek out what actually works best in teaching writing rather than repeating assignments automatically, letting habits overwhelm knowledge of best practices, relying on ways of thinking that are at best unproven folklore and more often than not conclusively known to be detrimental to students' learning. The book stands as an admonition that there are better ways — ways better both for students and teachers.

However, *Why They Can't Write* is not primarily aimed at writing teachers, particularly not teachers with some background in composition & rhetoric. While there's certainly much of interest to composition & rhetoric folks, Warner's goal is to make available to a general audience the insights that have been central to composition pedagogy and scholarship for decades. "With this book," Warner says on page 5, "I want to speak to policy makers, educators, parents of school-aged children, and even students themselves, so we can engage in conversation and collaboration that will meet the needs of our culture and communities."

As I read it, I thought about who I would want to give this book to. Yes, I'd love all the comp & rhet folks I know to read

it, but as long as they have some contemporary knowledge of their field, they don't *need* it in the way other groups do. I want to give this book to parents, to teachers outside of English departments, to anybody with authority over education policy, and to people who hire employees — in short, exactly the audience Warner identifies for himself, and exactly the audience that the title calls to: the people who do, in fact, frequently ask those of us who teach (or have taught) writing why kids these days "can't write".

2.

The idea of writing in the title's question, and in the book itself, is not all types of writing. This is a book about what we might call expository writing: nonfiction aimed primarily at communicating with a more-or-less identifiable audience. The type of writing most people do in their lives.

I found myself a bit at odds with the book when I thought about it through the lens of what, for lack of a better term, I'll call creative writing (fiction, poetry, drama, lyrical essays, etc.). We need more articles, chapters, and books about the value of creative writing outside of Creative Writing programs and courses — but this is not that book. Occasionally, but only occasionally, I yearned for it to draw more from Warner's experience as a creative writer, mostly because I find it difficult myself to compartmentalize my writing identities, and that difficulty with compartmentalization usually seems to me more blessing than curse.

These feelings were byproducts of a nagging yearning for Warner to more often emphasize the idea of *play* and *pleasure* in writing tasks. It's there occasionally, usually implied rather than stated. However, there seemed to me to be an undercurrent of Protestant work ethic dutifulness to many of Warner's chapters. That's understandable, given that the book's purpose is to persuade people that teaching writing effectively is serious

work, that writing teachers are serious scholars, and so on. But there is a danger to always emphasizing the idea that writing is a hard, labor-intensive, serious task. It comes out in a telling moment in the chapter about grades (a chapter I like a lot): Warner describes achieving a goal that any good teacher should aspire to, of creating a classroom environment where by the end of the term the students barely need the teacher to be in the room anymore. "I looked around the room," he writes, "and saw something like a playground (or maybe 'workground') the students had created and populated for themselves."

It's the parenthetical comment that I find telling. And I understand the fear of talking about anything serious as a form of play. In the US, at least, it often feels like we're getting away with something if we enjoy what we do, if there is pleasure in what we call our work. *Work* should be tough, punishing. Play is for weekends and occasional holidays.

Even though writing well often requires immense effort, focus, persistence, endurance (ugh, that day I had to write 6,000 words!), and other terms likely popular with Protestants … the most consistently accurate criterion I've found for knowing when I'm writing well is a sense of play and pleasure that the task allows, even if — often if! — that task exhausts me. So I couldn't help myself when I read the 9-point list Warner offers of the feelings and situations that allow him to do his best work — reader, I couldn't help myself: I reached for a sticky note and slammed it on the page and scrawled, "No sense of PLAY?!"

There is a certain sense of pleasure implied in two of the items on the list: "1. I am passionate about the subject and have the freedom to write about my interests" and "8. I am likely to learn something via the act of writing that I did not previously know". If we assume that passion and learning are pleasurable then these items indicate that writing can be pleasurable. (A good assumption, I'm betting.) Each of the numbered items is

sensible, and most are likely important to anyone doing good writing, but at moments when reading *Why They Can't Write*, I wanted more Lynda Barry, less Martin Luther.[1]

It's not only pleasure and play generally that seem sidelined in the book, but pleasure and play of a particular sort: the linguistic sort. Warner asserts in a chapter called "Increasing Rigor" (more Protestant Work Ethic) that

> the sentence is not the basic skill or fundamental unit of writing.
>
> The idea is.
>
> In fact, as almost everyone has experienced as they write, the final specifics of the sentence are often the very last thing to take shape in a piece of writing. When experienced writers struggle over sentences the battle is not about "correctness," as we teach developing writers, but in lassoing the words that best express the idea. Even for experienced writers, perhaps especially for experienced writers, the earliest sentence-making attempts in a draft are often provisional and unsatisfactory.

Well, yes and no. More no, honestly. Maybe I'm weird. (Okay, I'm weird.) But for me when writing, at least as important as any *idea* is a sense of rhythm, of shape, of structure, of sound. When struggling over sentences, that's the battle. The words may express the idea just fine, but with the writing I really care about, if it sounds wrong, I struggle with the sentence for a long time.

So while I agree that it's helpful to get students to see beyond "correctness" and get them working to express their ideas, it's exactly at moments like these in the book that I wish

[1] See Lynda Barry's wonderful books *What It Is, Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor,* and *Making Comics* for a joyful celebration of the work and play of creativity.

there were more poetic insights, more open attention to the play of language.

3.

My writing about my qualms above is disproportionate to my admiration and gratitude for this book. If I were writing proportionally, the above would be a footnote to a much longer essay about all that is valuable in *Why They Can't Write*. (No time for that. No need, either: just read the book.) Nonetheless, highlighting qualms, even minor ones such as mine, seems like a good way to work with the book, using it as a way to learn at least as much about one's own values as Warner's.

Rather than going on at length about it all, I find myself wanting to quote some favorite passages and respond briefly to them.

The following come from the second half of the book, mostly, which is when, for whatever reason, I seemed most inclined to note particular passages—

> Following the publication of my novel, which featured an unlikeable protagonist in the midst of crisis, I tried to write a book about characters people would like and root for. I made it through about fifty thousand words before I began to loathe the characters because I was trying so hard to make them likeable. When I write fiction, I seem attracted almost exclusively to characters I want to punish on the way to partial redemption.[2]

(This I loved simply because I, too, have had an extremely limited audience for fiction because I often fail to write about characters people find "likeable", and, worse, I rarely even give my ever-unlikeable characters partial redemption. I read this passage and thought, "Solidarity!")

[2] Warner, *Why They Can't Write*, 149.

> Rather than allowing students to see a writing task as familiar to the point of being rote, I want them to approach each writing occasion from scratch. Every writing occasion is a new problem to solve, a new experience, and a chance to explore and improve one's practice.[3]

(On one hand, I want to carve these sentences into the walls of all our classrooms, because if we can help students develop the flexibility to be able to write as if each new writing task is, indeed, new, then we will have done much to empower students. On the other hand, I don't for a moment believe this characterization of writing. Writing is an encounter with constrictions and inheritances. As writers, we work both with and against genres, styles, intertextualities, linguistic standards, cultural codes, and readerly expectations created by the mass of all that has been read before. This is where *play* becomes important: if writing is a matter of play, then all that we bring to the blank page — including the rules of five-paragraph essays — becomes fodder for creative expression. When teaching academic writing, I like to use *They Say/I Say*, a textbook I expect Warner dislikes because it provides numerous templates for students to work with. Used with a sense of play, though, these templates become liberating. I tell the students to think of them like *Mad Libs*. Formal academic writing particularly creates anxieties in students — both because they've likely been taught it punitively ["Never use first-person pronouns! F!"] and because it requires a tone different from that of most spoken conversation, which is what students so often use as a gauge of their prose. While playing around with the templates in *They Say/I Say*, students can learn some of the assumed moves of a particular, and often forbidding, genre of writing … but because our attitude toward the templates is open and exploratory rather than punitive and nitpicky, the effect is generative,

[3] Warner, *Why They Can't Write*, 155.

even creative. And if you think academic writing can't be creative and, yes, pleasurable, please see Eric Hayot's *The Elements of Academic Style* and "Academic Writing, I love You. I Really Do.")

> I want students to stop thinking about rules and start thinking about values as they make choices. I want them to ask themselves questions like, "I can get away with a phrase like 'telling shit from shinola' in a book from an academic press?" Is profanity beyond the pale? What about the saying itself? Is it archaic? Have I included it to amuse myself or does it genuinely advance my argument and enhance my connection to the audience.[4]

(The above is a marvelous demonstration of the kind of thinking processes that will lead students toward becoming more fluent and effective writers. It's not about *correctness*, but rather about purpose and audience. Although I would never tell you not to include something to amuse yourself. Indeed, I would worry about your writing if you didn't include at least a little bit of something for your own amusement. But then, I'm not a "kill your darlings" sort of person — I think you should round up your darlings, put them in an incubator, and make them breed!)

> …students [need] to be tasked with finding their own mistakes, because the worst thing a student can say after turning in an assignment or taking an exam and being asked, "How'd you do?" is "I have no idea."[5]

(Yes, yes, yes! I make students do quite a bit of self-evaluation and reflection throughout the term. I've always done so to

[4] Warner, *Why They Can't Write*, 158.
[5] Warner, *Why They Can't Write*, 172.

some extent, but in the last few years it's become a fundamental element of almost every assignment. Generally, students don't much like self-evaluation. I didn't when I was a student. I remember one of my favorite teachers in college asking us to write reflections on our term papers — she quite reasonably wanted to know how we perceived our accomplishment. I did it, hemming and hawing my way through, and all the time thought to myself: "It's *her* job to judge it, not mine!" But I was wrong. Yes, it's nice to know what a teacher thinks of your work, especially if that teacher is accomplished and you have respect for her, but in terms of actually learning something that can be used later, it was much more important for me to develop some ability to judge my own work, since I would never have this teacher for a class again, and so knowing only her opinion of my work wouldn't help me much with different teachers and readers later. What *would* help me would be if I could tell when I was writing and thinking well and when I wasn't, so I could adjust my work as necessary, or at least adjust my expectations.)

> An effective writer is confident in communicating their beliefs, while simultaneously remaining open to having those beliefs challenged and then changed as they realize their existing beliefs may be in conflict with their values. This book, for example, reflects a process of bringing my beliefs about how to teach writing into better alignment with my underlying values.[6]

(Warner talks about emphasizing with students the idea of *beliefs* rather than *bias* in writing. This is an idea I am going to steal for my classes immediately, because I frequently try to get students to do something resembling rhetorical analysis when reading, and so have often resorted to getting them to look for

[6] Warner, *Why They Can't Write*, 182.

bias [both the writer's and their own], but the word's connotations cause endless trouble. "Biased = bad" is a pervasive idea that I've never found a good tool to overcome, no matter how many times I say there's no such thing as a completely unbiased perspective (a perspective is, pretty much by definition, biased) and our job is not to eradicate bias but to account for it. I admire how clearly Warner articulates here the way that *beliefs* and *values* may be better words for analysis.)

> Larson argues that research should be properly viewed as "an activity," not a form or a genre. The generic "research paper" becomes a tool for students to prove that they can do certain activities, like locate sources in a library, or summarize them in an annotated bibliography, but those activities are often divorced from a larger rhetorical situation. The resulting research paper is a demonstration of having done those activities, as opposed to utilizing the tool of research as part of a robust and genuine analytical process.[7]

(For three years, I taught nothing but First-Year Writing, and during that time I got pretty good at teaching the assignments required by our program, at least if I judge my success/failure by the evidence of the students' work. But there was one persistent exception: the research paper. I gave it the longest amount of time of any of the assignments (the others being an analytical essay and a personal essay), and I worked closely with the students and refined the assignment every term and researched all the pedagogical literature I could find about research papers and still, no matter what, every single term the results made me want to crawl under my desk and die. In the

[7] Warner, *Why They Can't Write,* 189. The paper referred to at the beginning of this quotation is Richard L. Larson's "The 'Research Paper' in the Writing Course: A Non-form of Writing" from *College English* in 1982.

end, I had to stop caring. Or at least try to stop caring. I was required to assign an impossible assignment. Even my best students did their worst work with it. Consistently. Warner offers some good alternatives to the traditional research paper, designed to achieve the same sorts of knowledge [when that knowledge seems valuable] but through other sorts of assignments, ones much more specific in their goals, purposes, and audiences. We really need to abolish the whole phrase "research paper" from our vocabulary, because it is too general to do any good for us. Were I in charge of a First-Year Composition program, that would be one of my first commandments: Identify the skills that this mythological creature known as the "research paper" is supposed to teach, evaluate which of those skills are actually of value to students, then use other assignments to teach those skills.)

> One of my most consistent frustrations with the systems in which we ask students to write is that we actually have a tremendous body of existing knowledge about what works and why it works.[8]

(Yes, yes, and more yes. Research on the teaching of writing goes back many decades — take a look at Richard Braddock's *Research in Written Composition* from 1963 if you want some sense of how far back it goes. For more recent research, see such books as George Hillocks's *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching* [1986] and *Research on Composition: Multiple Perspectives on Two Decades of Change* [ed. Smagorinsky, 2006] and the *Handbook of Writing Research* [ed. MacArthur, Graham, & Fitzgerald, 2016] and *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts in Writing Studies* [Adler-Kassner & Wardle] and numerous other books, journals, and articles. This is one reason why I wish there were more communication between the fields of

[8] Warner, *Why They Can't Write*, 225.

Comp/Rhet and Creative Writing — in my experience, most creative writing programs are run on folktales about what works in the teaching of writing, and they would benefit from a little bit more evidence-based practice. There's been some movement toward this, but much more would be valuable. Teaching writing is an art more than a science, certainly, but as Warner says, at this point we really *do* know what tends to work best and what doesn't. Yet so many policy-makers, administrators, parents, and even teachers are ignorant of this research (if not willfully ignoring it) and so folkloric ideas about teaching writing continue to have significant power. One of the great virtues of *Why They Can't Write* is that it provides general readers with some information about the knowledge we have about what does and doesn't work, and why.)

—January 2019

How to Write and Gertrude Stein and How to Read

This essay was originally published in Teaching Modernist Women's Writing in English *edited by Janine Utell (MLA 2021). I have kept the reference style the same as in the MLA volume and included a page of works cited at the end rather than in this book's bibliography.*

I first stumbled on the usefulness for students of Gertrude Stein's most abstract writing when I was a high school teacher. At the beginning of one of my first years of teaching, I set on my desk a few conventional writing handbooks as well as a ragged copy of Stein's *How to Write* (bought at a yard sale). I used Stein's book primarily as a paperweight, and never thought about incorporating it into my classes. And then one day I was sitting at my desk, talking with a student about her writing, and, for whatever reason, I was struggling and failing to help her understand that her obsession with grammatical correctness was keeping her from being able to write much of anything for fear that whatever she wrote would be, somehow, wrong.

In desperation, I grabbed *How to Write*. "Gertrude Stein is a famous writer," I said. "She wrote a book called *How to Write*. On page 109, she says, 'Forget grammar and think about potatoes.'"

My student flipped through the pages.

"I don't understand," she said. I told her to read something aloud. She opened to page 187: "A sentence is made when they like the sun. If they like the sun."

She glared at me. "*I don't understand*," she said angrily.

I told her she was excused from doing any other homework until she had completed the assignment I was now giving her: she was to write two pages in the style of Gertrude Stein.

It took her a week or so, but she did it, and not only that, she wrote three pages. Her writing wasn't a convincing imitation of Gertrude Stein, but that didn't matter, because it was nothing like anything she had written before, and everything she wrote for my class afterward showed at least a little bit more playfulness, a little bit more freedom.

Stein's work can serve as an excellent model not so much of a finished product, since her own texts remain on the more avant- side of the avant-garde, but rather as a model of a compositional process and of an innovative attitude toward language and play. Hazel Smith writes that "language-based strategies encourage you to think in ways which are non-linear, and to make unconscious connections. They coax the associative modes of thinking which are pivotal to creative endeavor" (4). Encouraging student writers to be inspired by Stein not only helps them develop creative thinking skills; it may also strengthen their awareness of the possibilities of language and help them overcome the debilitating habit of thinking that there is one right way to write.

I still keep *How to Write* nearby for moments when I need to appeal to an authority that will shock students out of their assumptions about writing, but when introducing Stein in class nowadays I typically use her poems — "Susie Asado," "If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso," or sometimes

selections from *Tender Buttons*.[1] In literature courses and writing courses, my goal in using Stein is for students to imagine new ways of reading and writing. I use similar exercises across all courses I teach, because even when I'm not teaching a course for an English department, my interests are similar: analysis, research, and writing. I offer students an environment where they can experiment and play, an environment that will help them expand their imaginations. My experience as a literary scholar and a creative writer influences my feeling that the separation between literature, on the one hand, and writing courses, on the other, is artificial and sometimes, in fact, detrimental. Nonetheless, different types of courses obviously require different emphases.

Many students find comfort in formulas and templates, and in introductory courses particularly, I do provide some. But formulas and templates must be strategic and provisional. At some point in every course, I want students to move beyond their perceptions of what reading and writing should be.

How to Write

The most common assignment for which I use Stein in writing courses is a simple one: I tell students we are going to perform an experiment, and I ask for a volunteer to read aloud, carefully and seriously, the poem "Susie Asado." They inevitably struggle a bit, and sometimes a tone of disbelief or mockery enters their voice (if it's noticeable and consistent, I stop them and ask them to continue reading more seriously). When the first student is finished, I hand the poem to another student and have them read it aloud. The other students do not have

[1] For other approaches to teaching "If I Told Him" and *Tender Buttons,* see essays in Esdale and Mix*, Approaches to Teaching the Works of Gertrude Stein*. A substantial list of resources for teaching Stein is available on the companion Web site for *Teaching Modernist Women's Writing in English* at https://modwomen.mla.hcommons.org/2018/04/14/cheney-how-to-write-and-gertrude-stein-and-how-to-read/

the text in front of them, which is important because I don't want them to be thinking about how they would read it themselves; I want them to be listening to their peers and hearing the different tones and styles each reader uses. Depending on time and the class's patience, I sometimes pass the poem to a third reader.

After this, I give a copy of the poem to everyone in the class. Usually, students want to discuss what the poem means, because previous English classes have taught them to treat the reading of poetry like cryptography, the cracking of the poem's code yielding a succinct summary of theme or a chart of symbols. Depending on where we are in the course and my goals for that day, I will sometimes tell students that the poem was intended to be a portrait of a flamenco dancer; usually, however, I will say that the poem has no referential meaning.[2] No matter what I tell students about the poem, though, my ultimate goal is to encourage discussion of its unique features: How would students describe this poem to somebody who hasn't read it? How is this poem similar to, say, Robert Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening"?

Early on in our discussion of the poem, I begin a list on the board of the poem's unique features. Then, I give students copies of "If I Told Him." Often, I play a recording of Stein herself reading the poem, which is illuminating because of the serious, fluent, and rhythmic manner in which she reads it. Students are always a little afraid that Stein's abstract writings are some sort of joke whose punchline they don't get, but hearing Stein herself read helps dispel that fear. After reading "If I Told Him," we return to our list of the unique features of Stein's

[2] The decision of whether to mention the flamenco dancer is significant: if my goal is to help students appreciate the sound and shape of words stripped of denotative meaning, then I don't want to say anything that will, for instance, make them search the text for analogues to dancing. I save that sort of discussion for "If I Told Him" and selections from *Tender Buttons,* where the possibility of representation is more clearly offered by the titles.

writing and see if we need to add anything. If there is time, we move on to some pieces from *Tender Buttons*.

For homework, I give students a simple prompt: write at least five hundred words in the style of Gertrude Stein. It is important that this assignment be of some significant length, because it will be much more frustrating that way, and, illogical as it may sound, frustration is key to the success of this assignment. Thus: *at least* five hundred words.

In every class, there are one or two students who have a lot of fun with the assignment and who hardly struggle, but the majority usually find the assignment nearly impossible, and some don't even complete it. The ones who do complete it usually apply a kind of surrealism or absurdism to their writing that is different from Stein's nonsensical use of language. "Your words conjure images," I often say. "If you write, 'The purple cow jumps over the wombat-dog,' that's very different from what Stein writes in 'Susie Asado': 'A lean on the shoe this means slips slips hers.'" Recognizing this difference can be revelatory for students, and they can go on to discuss what Stein's radical move away from referential meaning does to language. We can discuss shapes and sounds, rhythms, repetitions, and patterns.[3]

Texts such as "Susie Asado," "If I Told Him," and *Tender Buttons* are so far removed from what most people think writing must be and do that reading, discussing, and imitating these works helps broaden students' perspectives on writing more effectively than would a text easily shoehorned to fit students' expectations at the beginning of the semester. The radical shock of an encounter with Stein gives students permission to move away from what Peter Elbow calls defensive writing: "Defensive writing means not risking: not risking complicated thoughts or language, not risking half-

[3] A comparison of Stein's work with instrumental music and abstract painting can also be helpful, as students do not have the same expectation that such nonliterary art forms must be referential.

understood ideas, not risking language that has the resonance that comes from being close to the bone" (xix).

If there is time after our discussion, students revise their writing assignments in an attempt to make them more like Stein's writing. At this point, their efforts are usually successful. It's important, however, to highlight the point of our imitative work: the imitation is a means, not an end. I don't want students to write like Gertrude Stein; I want them to be freed by Stein's radical choices to find their own way. In keeping with that goal, I draw connections between Stein's abstract writings and less obviously experimental work by other writers. Hemingway is an obvious choice, given how his sentence style is a kind of popularization of Stein's rhythms, and the children's book *Goodnight, Moon* also works well.[4] But I typically end up using the first few pages of Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*, which is distant enough from Stein's aesthetic to provide a productive comparison and allows us to expand our ideas about rhythm, repetition, and reference while we also, by means of Rhys's concrete prose, trace the complexities of what might at first glance seem so simple.

Whatever texts and authors I choose, all of my lessons after reading Stein focus on transfer, on finding our own voices after being liberated by hers. Her work remains a reference point throughout the semester: if students seem to be falling back into old and unhelpful patterns, if they are allowing their assumptions about form and convention to limit their language and imagination, I remind them of Stein's experiments.

[4] For connections between Stein and Margaret Wise Brown, author of Goodnight, Moon, see Anne E. Fernald's delightful essay "In the Great Green Room: Margaret Wise Brown and Modernism."

How to Read

In an excellent essay on using Stein's texts in a creative writing workshop, Laura Mullen concludes that

> perhaps the first lesson Stein has to teach us is also the simplest: How to read. We think we know that already, yet no one who has sat in on a workshop is unaware of how reading, in that location, is attested to most often not by an accurate description of what is on the page but by a perfect tornado of opinions about what should or could be on the page instead. (207–08)

Stein's lessons on reading are equally valuable for the literature classroom, where an accurate description of what is on the page is both as important and as difficult to come by as it is in a writing class.

In literature courses, I introduce Stein in the same way that I do in writing courses, through an imitation exercise, because when students only read Stein and don't try to imitate her style, they undervalue the difficulty and precision of her particular methods of avoiding and undermining conventional sense. What students need to see right away is not that Stein doesn't make sense, but, more precisely, how she doesn't make sense.

Sequence is important if a teacher decides to include some of Stein's more abstract texts to explore her place within certain conceptions of modernism (or within groups such as the lost generation writers, literary exiles, women writers, queer writers, etc.). The intuitive approach is to move from some of Stein's more accessible and popular texts toward the more abstract ones, but I've preferred the opposite approach, for a few reasons. The shock effect of writings like "Susie Asado," "If I Told Him," *Tender Buttons, How to Write*, etc. can be a valuable pedagogical tool, and I fear weakening this effect by providing context for these writings before students encounter

them. And, more important, I find it easier to work toward denotative or referential meaning than to work away from it. Wrestling with the sorts of writings in the selections of Stein's works edited by either Ulla E. Dydo or Richard Kostelanetz helps students confront assumptions about language and meaning.[5] Starting with Stein's more difficult texts, we quickly learn that we cannot fall back on typical habits of reading, and must instead develop new strategies.

Introducing Stein can be especially productive for group work. In small groups, students share their impressions of Stein's text or texts, then come up with a list of advice for a reader, a task that always proves challenging because, at this point, students are the ones who themselves would like some advice. For that reason, the content of the lists usually ends up being of limited value, but the process of trying to imagine what such advice would look like is useful, particularly in a group, where students can share their ideas, build on one another's insights, and feel not quite so alone in their befuddlement. The lists typically include such advice as "Read it aloud" and "Don't try to make every word make sense" (perfectly good advice), and in their discussions, students must justify the reading strategies they propose. These group discussions often lead to richer insights. This inductive approach to Stein fits

[5] Dydo's *Stein Reader* comprises experimental and lesser-known writings based on consultation of the manuscripts and presented in the order in which they were written. Particularly useful for teachers is the preface to each text, which offers not only information on the text's composition and publication but also some guidance for reading. Kostelanetz's *Gertrude Stein Reader* volume is subtitled *The Great American Pioneer of Avant-Garde Letters*, which the book seeks to substantiate with some of Stein's most experimental and difficult writings, many of them short enough to be practical even for teachers who aren't able to spend a lot of time on Stein. Kostelanetz writes a thoughtful introduction and adds short headnotes for many of the texts to highlight what he sees as their notable features, e.g., "'Old and Old' is sustained wordplay. If you think such writing is easy, try it sometime and discover how the constraints can be defeating" (50).

with a key recommendation in James M. Lang's *Small Teaching*: "When you are teaching a new cognitive skill (e.g. writing in a new genre), let students try their hand at it (and receive feedback) before they feel ready" (60).

Learning to read Stein is very much a new cognitive skill, and after students have practiced it, I begin introducing some explications of and critical approaches to her work as a way to help them see beyond what we can come up with on our own. The opposite approach could be stifling—without real experience as readers of Stein, students could too easily defer to the authority of scholars and critics, depriving them of the "unlimited latitude for personal response" that Mina Loy celebrated in Stein's work and in modern art generally (436).

Early readers of Stein's texts often had direct access to the context (literary and otherwise) in which Stein wrote, and especially in a survey course, teachers can provide access to certain contexts for students. There is much value, for instance, in having students look at modern art (of which Stein was an important collector), listen to modernist music (especially Virgil Thompson, with whom Stein collaborated), and read other literature of the period (anything from Dada sound poetry to Hemingway) that provokes productive dialogue with Stein's experiments. Such an approach is enriched with selections of reactions to Stein's work by her contemporaries, many of which are easily available in *The Critical Response to Gertrude Stein* edited by Kirk Curnutt.[6] With no recourse to the readings of other critics, Stein's early readers and critics had to figure out their own ways to read her work (if they didn't simply dismiss it outright), and the history of how intrepid readers have found ways to read Stein is useful

[6] W. H. Auden's 1941 review of Stein's *Ida* can be especially useful, as it is difficult to tell whether Auden is being imitative, parodic, or both. Logan Esdale's critical edition of *Ida* includes a section of reviews of the novel from its first release in 1941, including the Auden review (303-305), and these show how common it was for reviewers to attempt parodies of Stein (291-324).

for students after they have themselves grappled with her writings.

Stein can also be a guide to her own work. While some texts such as "Composition as Explanation" and *Lectures in America* are relatively accessible, they are hardly simple guides, and may not be especially useful in courses where Stein is taught for only a few class sessions at most.[7] Dydo offers another approach to understanding Stein, one that could be adapted to shorter and longer class sessions. In the seventh chapter of *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises*, Dydo reads some of the essays in *How to Write* alongside short texts Stein was working on at the same time, seeking "to find echoes as much across pieces as chronologically," with the effect that "incomprehensible passages can suddenly connect and open meanings as exhilarating discovery" (337).[8]

Comparing different Stein texts with one another can be illuminating, but in survey courses especially, comparing Stein's techniques to those of other writers with similar goals or perspectives may produce a synergy otherwise unavailable. One of the most productive pairings is with Virginia Woolf, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis proposed in her extraordinary essay "Woolfenstein" (later revised as "Woolfenstein, the Sequel" for the valuable anthology *Primary Stein*). DuPlessis finds particular resonance between *Tender Buttons* and *The Waves*:

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[7] Both "Composition as Explanation" and *Lectures in America* are available in the two-volume Library of America edition of Stein's writings. Also worthwhile is *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein* edited by Haas, which is out of print but worth tracking down, as it includes not only a helpful 1946 interview with Stein but also short selections from her writings arranged and introduced to provide an approach to reading her work.

[8] The problem with following Dydo's approach, though, is that few of the texts she discusses alongside *How to Write* are easily available, and so a teacher would need access to a library with Stein volumes that have long been out of print. Even without access to the specific texts Dydo explores, however, readers can gain much from her example of close reading, and can engage in new analyses of more readily available Stein texts alongside *How to Write*.

"*The Waves* is Woolf's most Steinian novel and shows Stein's striking reverberations as a maker of an experimental, even drastic, poetics of writing" ("Woolfenstein, the Sequel" 53). Aside from *The Waves*, there is much in Woolf that may be productively compared with Stein, given the attention both writers gave not only to psychology but also to time and objects—*Tender Buttons* pairs at least as effectively with *To the Lighthouse* as with *The Waves*, and I can imagine interesting discussions of objects and repetition when paired with *The Years* as well, given the many repetitions of phrases, objects, colors, and sounds throughout that novel.

Joan Retallack has described Stein as "an experimental literary humanist who developed a fundamentally investigative poetics" whose "work leaves more questions than answers for her readers" (74). This investigative poetics and experimental ethos allow students the freedom to broaden their own processes of reading and writing. The writings of Gertrude Stein cannot be reduced to multiple-choice questions or standardized tests. Instead, Stein's texts demand that we reimagine our expectations of language and writing, and that we broaden our sense not only of what is allowed but also of what is possible.

At the end of one of the most illuminating studies of Stein that I've encountered, *How Reading Is Written*, Astrid Lorange declares that "epistemological anarchism," a concept from Paul Feyerabend, is valuable to the study of Stein. Lorange describes as an approach where a reader does not seek "the one or essential key to Stein, but reading Stein for her exhausting and itinerant suggestions and finding a way to put their generous energies into writing" (247). Such reading leads to writing. This is, perhaps, the ultimate liberation that teaching Stein's works allows: whether we start with writing or start with reading, we must always return to the other, so that our reading process informs our writing process and vice versa, as

the two realms united by a shared practice of experimentation and play.

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Lessons for Higher Ed from the Survival of Independent Bookstores

Another day, another report of an independent bookstore ... doing pretty well:

> Independently owned and operated bookstores like Appletree Books, a fixture in Cleveland Heights' Cedar Fairmount neighborhood since 1975, are redefining their roles in the community, as not only as places to buy books, but also to enjoy and encourage reading. Eight years after the nation's No. 2 bookseller Borders Books & Music closed for good, indie bookstores are thriving as community hot spots that help book lovers unplug from their electronic devices, discover new reads, and meet like-minded spirits.[1]

[1] "Independent bookstores turn the page, thrive as places to unplug" by Janet H. Cho, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 10 March 2019. https://www.cleveland.com/news/2019/03/independent-bookstores-turn-the-page-thrive-as-places-to-unplug.html

After some apocalyptic years, indie bookstores have been having something of a resurgence.[2] This warms my heart, but it has also got me thinking about what, if any, lessons there are for higher education in the perhaps surprising, even unlikely, prospering of indie bookstores in a seemingly hostile market.

Harvard Business School professor Ryan Raffaelli has been studying the success of indie bookstores, and his findings offer some interesting guidelines for those of us who are thinking about how to survive in a rapaciously capitalist era.[3]

I was struck by a lot things David Sandberg, co-owner of the wonderful Porter Square Books, said in the video piece by Amelia Kunhardt that accompanies the information about Raffaelli's research at Harvard's *Working Knowledge* website. "If we see our product as books," Sandberg says, "and what we compete on is price — we lose. If we don't see our product as books, if we see our product as a service and a community (of which books are one piece) well, then we can compete."

Community is one of the key factors Raffaelli's research has revealed in indie bookstores' success (not to any bookseller's surprise, I expect). Sandberg makes the point that no indie bookstore can compete on price with Amazon, no indie bookstore is going to build a better website than Amazon, etc., but they can compete on experience, particularly the

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[2] Originally, there was a reference to a page on the American Booksellers Association website titled "Independent Bookstores are Thriving", but that page has since been deleted. (It can be read via the Internet Archive at https://web.archive.org/web/20190130184610/https://www.bookweb.org/for-the-record) For a more recent account, see "New page for indie bookstores: Diverse, in demand, dedicated to making a difference" by Phaedra Trethan, *USA Today*, 1 September 2024, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2024/09/01/independent-bookstores-thriving/74797026007/

[3] See "How Independent Bookstores Have Thrived in Spite of Amazon.com" by Carmen Nobel, Working Knowledge: Distilling Harvard Business School research for leaders who make a difference, 20 November 2017. https://www.library.hbs.edu/working-knowledge/why-independent-bookstores-haved-thrived-in-spite-of-amazon-com

physical, in-person experience of interacting with knowledgeable staff and attending live events such as signings. Further, they can be local by design — they can partner with other local businesses and work together, both creating new community opportunities and being good members of the community that exists. That sort of community synergy is not something Amazon can achieve.

Toward the end of the video, Raffaelli, good Harvard Biz guy that he is, says that when he started studying indie bookstores, he assumed there would be fierce competition between them, especially within the same neighborhoods. But that's not what he found. Independent booksellers work together, he says, because they don't just want to save their own stores — they want to preserve "the category as a whole." In a wonderful newspaper article about bookstores in the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts, an owner says, "Bookstores are really good about sending people from store to store. It's not one of those dog-eat-dog businesses like some industries are. We're real good about sending people back and forth from store to store."[4]

This is a community ethos, an ethos of mutual aid. It was developed out of desperation, but also out of the core values that led people to want to open bookstores in the first place. (Nobody with even the shreddiest shred of knowledge ever said, "I want to get rich really fast — I'm gonna open a BOOKSTORE!") Like most things of value, bookstores don't do well in an environment of rampant capitalism. Yet that is the environment we all find ourselves in today. We have to acknowledge that, and then work hard to carve out some space for ourselves where the capitalism is less rampant and our values can survive, or even, ideally, flourish. None of us are going

[4] "Independent Streak: Against the odds, small book stores are on the rise" by Gina Beavers, *Valley Advocate*, 5 July 2018. https://valleyadvocate.com/2018/07/05/independent-streak-against-the-odds-small-book-stores-on-are-the-rise/

to end the late capitalist horrorshow ruining countless lives every day, but we can work together to alleviate some of its symptoms and open new possibilities for better ways of being.

What would happen, I wondered as I read about bookstores, *if those of us in higher education saw some of our responsibility to be to the category as a whole?* I'm not entirely sure, partly because I'm not entirely sure what *the category as a whole* for us is. I am inclined to think it's not quite as broad as *higher education*. I am more inclined to think of it as *public higher education*. Or, to make it quite broad, indeed, perhaps our category is simply *public schooling*.

I'm writing this soon after the FBI arrested a bunch of rich and sometimes famous people who tried to bribe their kids' way into wealthy, prestigious colleges.[5] There are important things to say about all this (particularly the cynical way these people used disability provisions for their scheme), but unfortunately it keeps the focus on rich schools that are basically hedge funds with universities attached.[6] These schools have many powers in our society, and graduating from them can convey significant privileges.

But only a small percentage of the U.S. population attends such schools, and there have always been ways for the rich to bribe or bluster their way in, most of them perfectly legal.

[5] See the Wikipedia entry for "Varsity Blues Scandal": https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Varsity_Blues_scandal

[6] As Thomas Frank wrote in 2013: "Colleges and universities clamor greedily these days for pharmaceutical patents and ownership chunks of high-tech startups; they boast of being 'entrepreneurial'; they have rationalized and outsourced countless aspects of their operations in the search for cash; they fight their workers nearly as ferociously as a nineteenth-century railroad baron; and the richest among them have turned their endowments into in-house hedge funds." See "Academy Fight Song", *The Baffler*, August 2013. https://thebaffler.com/salvos/academy-fight-song

(Hello, Jared Kushner.)[7] But I think it is more important to spend our time thinking about the other schools, the ones that are being systematically defunded even as the hedge fund universities see their endowments grow to absurd levels.

We need to care about the schools that educate the majority of people, the schools that struggle for resources and yet provide excellent educations.

Rich people don't scheme to get their kids into highly selective schools just because those schools offer good educations. They scheme to get their kids into such schools so as to maintain class privilege and status. What horrible thing, we might ask, do they think will happen if their children go to the types of schools that the vast majority of American kids go to?

Meanwhile, the idea of public education as a public good is taking a beating as state funding for higher education continues to decline. I work at a public university in a state that's never been very interested in public funding for public education, and even our paltry funding took a massive cut in 2012 from which we have yet to recover. This devaluing of public education is a major obstacle, though hardly the only one.

In addition to (or as part of) that devaluing, we've also got to contend with the deep neoliberalism with which, in Peter-Wim Zuidhof's words, universities "have been reimagined in

[7] See "The Story Behind Jared Kushner's Curious Acceptance Into Harvard" by Daniel Golden, *ProPublica*, 18 November 2016. https://www.propublica.org/article/the-story-behind-jared-kushners-curious-acceptance-into-harvard. Fun bit of trivia: I worked at the school Kushner graduated from for a year, not quite a decade after Kushner had been there. I spent a good part of my early career in private college prep schools and the story of Kushner's path to Harvard is a familiar one for wealthy students at those schools. I once had a student who was waitlisted at an Ivy League university suddenly get accepted. "That was lucky!" I said, naively. She said her father had learned the school was interested in having a new building named for someone, and he had helped.

market terms and become suffused with market rationalities";[8] we've got to contend with the impoverishment of an entire generation of students via educational loans; we've got to contend with a cynical, instrumental anti-intellectualism wielded to silence ideas that don't jibe with corporate priorities; we've got to contend with — well, you can probably make your own list…

The concern for, and even loyalty to, *the category as a whole* leads directly to the support and development of community. For bookstores, it's a community of both booksellers and book readers, with the sellers (like the writers and publishers) being readers as well, and having come to the business via their love of reading. Something similar is true for teachers and learners in a school setting. Learning is what we love. Just as writers are drawn to their work from a mix of wanting to create what they have loved reading and from a desire to create what they have yet to see in the world, so teachers are often inspired into their career by the great teachers they've had, as well as by a desire to be the kind of teacher they dreamed of encountering.

We can learn many things on our own, and we can learn much informally (indeed, most of human history is a history of informal learning), but what schools offer is the opportunity to participate in learning with other people, the opportunity to *learn alongside*. I suppose this is why I feel generally indifferent to the growing movement for individualized learning. Such atomized education has its place — there are, of course, times when we just need to do stuff on our own, either to catch up with others or to satisfy a personal curiosity; times when we need to learn in our own way. It can be tremendously satisfying, but it's not what we need schools for. Learning alongside other people may not be efficient in certain ways, but it is irre-

[8] "Towards a Post-Neoliberal University. Protest and Complicity" by Peter-Wim Zuidhoff. *Krisis | Journal for Contemporary Philosophy* 35, no. 2 (2015): 50. https://krisis.eu/article/view/38898

placeable in many others, some of them broadly social (democracy relies on it, because democracy is governance with and alongside other citizens), some of them more personal. I think often of Isaac Asimov's prescient 1951 story "The Fun They Had", a tale of children educated by computers, children who don't know what books are good for or why anyone would learn anything together. The children are bored and sad, disconnected from the world and themselves. To me, it's a horror story, yet to many advocates of educational technology, the dystopia Asimov outlines is the end goal.

If we think about the success of indie bookstores, one lesson for higher education is to think about what we do that can't easily be replicated or improved through other means. What is it that these rather unwieldy institutions called *schools* offer that couldn't be found in any other form? Is what is offered of value? How can we focus more on that uniqueness and heighten the value?

I keep thinking of *in-person experience* and *community* as two features we ought to focus on, features that schools, like bookstores, are especially well positioned to strengthen and benefit from.

In-person experience is something educators ought to celebrate at least as much as indie bookstores do. In a world where, in the words of *New York Times* tech reporter Nellie Bowles, "human contact is now a luxury good",[9] bookstores and schools support a similar need: the need to be with other people in the same place at the same time. It ties in with another quality that bookstores have used to great advantage: *the local*. My own school has done some pretty neat things by linking local and in-person advantages. For instance, our meteorology program works closely with the Mount

[9] "Human Contact Is Now a Luxury Good: Screens used to be for the elite. Now avoiding them is a status symbol" by Nellie Bowles, *New York Times*, 23 March 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/23/sunday-review/human-contact-luxury-screens.html

Washington Observatory. That's just one example of how we've quite deliberately made our location into an asset for our students' educations, and I expect in coming years that we will see more and more such location-based work, because it makes no sense to try to attract students to a school that could be anywhere. We can't compete with wealthy schools that can offer everything under the sun. But those schools can't compete with us for what we have in our immediate surroundings, whether it be natural resources, history, or particular sorts of people and organizations.

Localism doesn't need to be a trap, though. Again, bookstores have shown the way. My own go-to indie bookstore is Gibson's in Concord, New Hampshire. Gibson's is hugely supportive of local writers and readers, but the staff also work hard to bring in ideas and writers from across the region and the country — sometimes through events where patrons read and discuss books from a wide variety of places, but also by having authors themselves visit. That's standard practice for bookstores these days, but a store like Gibson's faces some of the same challenges as small rural colleges do in terms of attracting visitors. There's not a ton of money or prestige to throw around, and the location is a bit out of the way of any big city. Where a writer can visit, say, Boston, and within the same day go to multiple bookstores without a whole lot of effort, that's not the case for central New Hampshire. We're a straight shot up the highway from Boston, but it's multiple hours roundtrip. Ingenuity and hospitality are key. I've known multiple writers who have come up to Gibson's to read from their new books because they liked the people and atmosphere. That's partly what keeps me going back to Gibson's and spending more money on books there than I would had I ordered those books on Amazon. The layout of the store, the knowledgeable and friendly staff, the careful selection of stock, the café, the comfy chairs — this all contributes to an experience of

place, an experience that can't be replicated by Gibson's online competitors. It is, as the Biz School people say, value added.

Community is the other value that indie bookstores clearly succeed with, and which colleges and universities need to pay close attention to. It's a common word, one thrown around a lot in educational circles, but I think we too often take a superficial approach.

A whole book could be written about community and how schools foster it (or don't), but here I want to focus on one aspect: building community inside the school itself through the work of learning.

First, I always go back to the simple lessons I have discussed before: that we flourish in places where we feel known, needed, and cared for. How we create and sustain such feelings is the hard part, and everybody probably always fails at it to some extent or another, but I often repeat those three words to myself as a kind of mantra or mnemonic, a way to recenter myself when it feels like things are going badly. How can I help other people here feel known, needed, cared for? How can I find it for myself?

While individual actions are important to fostering and enlivening community, institutions also shape the possibilities. There are smart, generous, creative people everywhere, but their efforts will either be magnified or impeded by the structures through which they have to work. You can have an institution that talks about community all the time and publishes beautiful brochures and websites promoting ideas of community, but if that institution also has a habit of firing its workers seemingly at random, the platitudes about community will collapse in hypocrisy. If people are feeling demoralized because they don't understand how decisions are made that affect their daily lives, giving them the occasional free cup of coffee is only going to re-energize people in the way that pouring salt on a wound would. Again: known, needed, cared for. It's hard to feel any of that when the message of your employer is that you are

disposable. It's hard to feel that you have any say in the shape of your own world when the Powers That Be constantly reconfigure the landscape on a whim. It's hard to feel like you are working in a community of people when all the words and actions of the leaders emphasize finance rather than humanity.

What would it mean for a school to be a community in which every member is devoted to the work of learning? I don't have any clear answer, and I suspect the question is too big for any one person to answer, anyway, no matter their expertise, but I think it's a vital question for us to ask ourselves as we think about what we want our schools to be. The question itself may be too vast to be answerable, but it may be useful as a prompt for thought and lens for action. Are the things we are spending time on things that support a community devoted to the work of learning? How are we bringing every member of the community in?

For instance, I think immediately of the tendency to see *teaching* as the job of faculty, *learning* as the job of students, and *support* as the job of staff. But that doesn't make sense in a community devoted to the work of learning. All of those are absolutely necessary roles, but if your teachers and staff aren't learning, if your students and staff aren't teaching, and if your faculty and students aren't doing support work … then your community isn't as effective and powerful as it could be.

Here's another question that comes out of the above: *Who gets to be a visionary?* In a strong community, everybody gets to shape and participate in the vision to some extent or another, particularly as it relates to their own life and knowledge. In a weak community, the vision is handed down from on high.

In-person experiences and community-building can work together, but they don't necessarily have to, so long as they aren't working against each other. We can adapt the values and benefits of one for the other. We can have online education and asynchronous distance learning if we still ask ourselves how such education and learning can be used to create and foster

community. Technology is a tool, and like any tool, we have to ask of it: How does this support a community in which every member is devoted to the work of learning? Many of us have experienced real community via the internet. As we talk about online education, I would be thrilled to see more attention paid to how to build a healthy online community. The content and systems will take care of themselves, and there's no need for the latest and highest of tech if principles of community-building are strong. There's a lot about online education and educational technology that makes me wary, and some things that I find flat-out nauseating, but I am very much in support of using computer technology to enhance community — a harder task than most others for which tech gets used in education, but also a significantly more worthwhile task.

Much more could be said, and probably ought to be said, by people who have studied these things more deeply than I. But I also think we need to be careful not to drown in abstruse language and Rube Goldberg taxonomies: two dangers for any expert. Useful philosophies aren't overly simple but rather are concentrations of complex thought, tools for opening doors that reveal vistas. The independent bookstores that are surviving these days are not ones whose managers proposed vast systems of novelty, but ones that returned to their basic values and asked what everybody who meets within the space of the bookstore desires and needs. They are stores that identified the values that established them in the first place, the values that made workers want to show up to work and customers want to shop there, and then matched those values with the constantly uncertain, and often hostile, environment of contemporary society. By doing so, these bookstores are also influencing that environment, reconfiguring parts of it back toward what the stores and their customers consider important for a good life.

Schools face at least as challenging, and daunting, a task — and opportunity.

—March 2019

Assignment: Low Tech Research

Here's an assignment I developed and tested out on a group of students and faculty — an assignment that asked them to do research without using any electronic devices. It worked quite well, and I plan to incorporate it into my classes in the future, though I will probably expand it a bit so it becomes a two-class exercise rather than trying to fit it into one. I think the extra time to think and reflect will be helpful.

It's essentially a library activity (my classroom is in the library), but it raises interesting questions about how and why we use technology, and the effect of that technology on our lives.

The first of the five questions to research is pretty specific to my own university. The others are more general. In creating questions, I was trying to come up with items that would be pretty easy to do a Google search on but rather confounding to think about without access to the internet.

I broke the class into groups of 3 or 4. That's a manageable size for this activity. Much larger would be unwieldy, much smaller wouldn't get some of the benefits we discovered: they had to problem-solve with each other without resorting to their phones. Multiple groups said they hadn't had so much personal interaction in group work in a long time. (This was one of the only responses that really shocked me.)

I should add that it was a lot of fun having faculty, staff, and students together working on one activity. It's a rare opportunity, and got me thinking that we should seek out more such opportunities and make them less rare. The diversity of

experiences and knowledge was a real pleasure. (We discovered such things as the generational line between people who know what microfiche is and people who have never heard the word before in their lives.)

I only gave the participants 15 minutes to do their work. It was enough time, though in class I will probably bump it up to 25 minutes, because I had a pretty research-savvy group.

Here's the handout I gave them:

Low-tech research [handout]

For this assignment, you will be doing research without any electronic devices. No phones, no computers, no people using phones or computers for you.

You can go anywhere in the library during this assignment. You can use anything that is not an electronic device. You can ask for help from anybody in the building, but they cannot use an electronic device.

Choose one of the questions below to research. It's important that you seek out not only a question that interests you, but that is DIFFICULT for you. If somebody in your group knows the answer already, that's not going to help you test and develop your research processes, which is the goal of this assignment. What's important is that you learn things about research, not that you get a quick answer. Indeed, getting a quick answer is more a sign of failure at this assignment than success.

Questions to choose from:

1. Who was Nathaniel Peabody Rogers and why was he important to Plymouth, New Hampshire?
2. What is something that happened in Kenya within the last week?
3. What was the weather on today's date 100 years ago?
4. What is a good way to make caramel?
5. What are the annual migration routes of yellow warblers (Setophaga petechia)?

Reflecting on the activity

When the participants returned to the classroom, I had them write individually for 5 minutes about their process: What did they do, how did they do it, what obstacles did they encounter, how did they approach those obstacles?

Once they had done some writing on their own, I had them share their reflections with their group and compare them. Did they emphasize the same things? Did some people pay more attention to certain parts of the process than others? Why might this be?

Then, they worked together to create a unified group statement of their process and experience, which they then shared in full class discussion. This proved to be lively, because the groups had different levels of experience, but all found significant challenges. It was an exciting conversation.

Finally, I asked them to think about which of these skills might be worth teaching to other people, and how they might be taught effectively. What did we learn that was worth holding on to?

—May 2019

Academic Integrity?

> The ChatGPT handwringing of late has bothered me, not least because it is cloaked in a kind of shock, like the domain of higher education has suddenly been sullied by this profane technology. But babes, it was always already here.
>
> —Brenna Clarke Gray[1]

I tried to ask ChatGPT to write something about academic integrity, but it said it was "at capacity right now", and for once I was convinced it was human. I know how you feel, ChatGPT. I know how you feel.

Of course, ChatGPT doesn't feel. ChatGPT is a program and feelings are a neurochemical process. But ChatGPT is a neat little wingdiddy of a thing that might, in fact, be accelerating all of the worst features of contemporary digitized life: fraud, spam, malware, mistrust, mass manipulation by wealthy

[1] "Whither Comes the Data: Current Uses of AI and Data Set Training in Higher Ed", *Digital Detox*, 9 January 2023. https://digitaldetox.trubox.ca/whither-comes-the-data-current-uses-of-ai-and-data-set-training-in-higher-ed/

and/or sociopathic people.[2] According to *Time* magazine, it was built through the exploitation and traumatization of Kenyan workers.[3] So worth keeping eyes on.

As Brenna Clarke Gray says in the piece I got the epigraph to this post from, it is hardly the only technological intervention in education that we ought to be paying attention to. I think this is actually a point in its favor, or at least in favor of the attention it's been getting. Academic technologists may lament the recent focus on ChatGPT, but if it gets people concerned and talking about — maybe even *doing something* about — the infestation of our lives by quietly insidious pieces of technology, then I'm all for the conversation. And if ChatGPT can write things like program evaluations, learning objectives, etc. — the boilerplate of academia that buries us all in constant, repetitive, often meaningless writing — then I might even become a big fan.

Opportunities to Chat

In publications I read and social media I follow, there has been quite a lot of anxiety about ChatGPT and plagiarism, often under the label of academic integrity. I am currently chair of my university's committee that oversees our (I think quite progressive, all things considered) academic integrity policy, so this is of interest to me. I have sat on academic integrity panels, though we have not had many since

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[2] Originally, I linked part of this sentence to "Machine Generated Text: A Comprehensive Survey of Threat Models and Detection Methods" by Evan Crothers, Nathalie Japkowicz, and Herna Viktor, available at arXiv:2210.07321. Preprint, arXiv, May 8, 2023. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2210.07321. Since then, of course, an ocean of more material has been published about the dangers and exploitative tendencies of large language models (LLMs), generative "AI", etc., and my own perspective became increasingly negative, indeed abolitionist.

[3] "Exclusive: OpenAI Used Kenyan Workers on Less Than $2 Per Hour to Make ChatGPT Less Toxic" by Billy Perrigo, Time.com, 18 January 2023. http://time.com/6247678/openai-chatgpt-kenya-workers/

instituting our current policy about 5 years ago, because that policy works hard to encourage students and instructors to have conversations and to work through their issues together — the idea is that since we're an educational institution, then we should strive to make such difficult moments into learning opportunities more than opportunities for teachers to exercise their most sadistic and juridical impulses. (When teachers and students can't come to any sort of agreement, we have an academic integrity hearing to try to work through it. The last one I sat on involved surveillance software and a group of students whom the software flagged as cheating; I don't think the instructor was pleased with the committee's decision, but I think the students felt heard and taken seriously, and that's important.)

Even within the discussion of plagiarism, ChatGPT isn't completely new. Ask any language teacher about Google Translate, for instance. Creative teachers of languages have found all sorts of ways to deal with Google Translate (and its ilk) over the years, and there's plenty of scholarship on the good, bad, and ugly of the tool at this point that could, perhaps, inform conversations about ChatGPT.

Some of the best responses to the panic about ChatGPT and education have emphasized the learning opportunity idea. (This is to ignore for now the necessary question of whether any engagement, positive or negative, with ChatGPT feeds into its creators' purposes, providing them with free labor, beta-testing, and data to exploit for their own capitalist ventures. That's an important question, but hardly unique to ChatGPT.)

It's possible that teachers are especially panicked about ChatGPT and plagiarism because there is a lingering fantasy that student writing is the last pure form of assessment. Of course, that's not remotely true, not only because plenty of smart people are terrible writers, but also because using other people's words has never been all that difficult for students. The panic over it has led to the commodification of it: writers

can make money by writing stuff for people less skilled with language, tech companies like Turnitin can then exploit teachers' fears.[4] Since some rich clod paid a smart peasant to write something for him at a medieval university, academia has been rife with people getting other people to do their work for them. It might even be considered one of the basic principals of academic institutions. How many university presidents write their own books … speeches … emails?

In that — admittedly cynical — sense, ChatGPT is just democratizing what has always been available to the rich and powerful. I am not here to argue it is a good thing, but I do think we ought not be too starry-eyed about the purity of our profession. Instead, we should seek opportunities for learning and teaching as well as opportunities to strengthen our scholarly communities.

Susan Blum explored the hows and whys of plagiarism and college culture well back in 2009, and the most interesting pedagogy around plagiarism has always emphasized the need to explore motives, which can be many.[5] Plagiarism tends to push teachers toward knee-jerk reactions and the worst sorts of carceral thinking — instead of asking "How can we understand this multifaceted phenomenon?", which is the usual academic approach to all sorts of things, we instead jump to, "How can I punish this student so severely that they will never in their life ever do anything remotely like this again?!?"

Yet, as much as I think a moment of plagiarism is a moment for us to have a conversation with a student to see what's going on with them — most often, it's either an issue of time or confusion (so we have to talk about how they're using their

[4] See "Another Terrible Idea from Turnitin" by John Warner, *Inside Higher Ed*, 6 February 2018. https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/just-visiting/another-terrible-idea-turnitin

[5] Susan D. Blum's book *My Word!: Plagiarism and College Culture* (Cornell University Press, 2009) is technologically out of date now, but it still outlines some useful history and offers a meaningful perspective.

time and what their priorities are; or we have to talk about why they didn't understand what they were supposed to do, or didn't understand the idea of originality we venerate) — and as much as I think a moment of plagiarism is a moment for us to consider what it is within our pedagogy that made plagiarism seem a viable option … still, I hold onto the idea of academic integrity as meaningful and even, dare I say it, sacred.

Scholarship and Integrity

When it comes to scholarship, academic integrity is the bedrock. Academic integrity enables the systems of scholarship to proceed openly and effectively because it creates a mutualistic system of trust. However, I think we conceive of both scholarship and academic integrity too narrowly.

One of the things that most concerns me about academia in the United States is the way we are pushing so many of our systems *away* from integrity. Think about the meaning of the word itself. Yes, the meaning I am most concerned with here is *integrity* as honesty and trust. But another meaning is *unity, wholeness*. The two meanings fit together when we consider academia.

The adjunctification of higher education diminishes academic integrity. Faculty who can't make a decent wage, who are barely allowed any connection with the institution, who are treated as if they are disposable — this is a problem for academic integrity. Why should those faculty trust the institution? Why should they be honest with it themselves? How can students develop the mentorship relationships essential to scholarly work if they can't trust that, barring emergencies, a faculty member will be around from one semester to the next?

The diminishment and active destruction of tenure is an attack on academic integrity. We usually talk about tenure as a tool for ensuring academic freedom, but there are a bunch of

problems with that, a big one being that it makes academic freedom a privilege of the tenured few. A healthy educational institution is one that seeks to make academic freedom and academic integrity bedrock concepts shared by every member of the scholarly community: faculty, students, staff, guests. Tenure helps preserve academic integrity by providing a base level of both job security and scholarly expectations, but it must be seen as only one feature in a broad landscape of freedom and integrity or else it becomes a tool of hierarchy and oppression. Tenure at its best ought to strengthen, encourage, and make visible the institution's commitment to its scholars and each tenured scholar's commitment to the institution. (Sadly, these days tenure is often little more than a weak guarantee of due process when the administration wants to fire someone. Not only has it been weakened, but its purpose, meaning, and value to the institution have been chiseled away.) A school that prioritizes hiring faculty in whatever way it is easiest to fire them is not a school that supports academic integrity — it is a school that is actively working against academic integrity.

The perpetual understaffing that creates burnout is a problem of academic integrity because it grinds people down and pushes them away from a sense of meaning, forcing them to do exactly what a plagiarizing student does: triage their way through deadlines and bureaucracy.

In utterly concrete ways the push to increase class sizes, cut majors, emphasize standardized tests, and gut higher education destroys academic integrity. In a brief but meaningful post about ChatGPT and plagiarism, Douglas Rushkoff writes:

> I understand why we might want to give competency exams to paramedics and cab drivers before entrusting them with our lives, but a liberal

> arts education is not a license to practice; it is an invitation to engage with ideas, culture, and society.[6]

That's a hard culture to engender with 50 or more students in a "seminar", or several hundred in a lecture, particularly when many colleges can no longer afford teaching assistants or graduate students to help read papers. It's even harder when students are showing up more for the credit than the learning.

There's our problem. Not any one particular tool or technology. Our institutions are being hollowed out, desiccated, all their structural and academic integrity weakened.

Austerity Is Not Integrity

The ideology of austerity is an ideology directly at odds with academic integrity.

The fault is not entirely at the feet of academic administrators. The work and structures of administration tempt even good, idealistic people to become bean counters, grumps, and dreamkillers beholden to the draconian pragmatics of the day's most immediate crisis. It is a rare administrator who can nurture a vision greater than that of the culture they are stuck in, which for us in the U.S. today is a materialistic, consumerist, individualistic one antagonistic toward any idea of the public good. Wealthy private colleges are still able to talk idealistically about learning; public schools have to slash everything except whatever happens to be most vocationally in vogue at the moment (thus moving the burden of paying for training away from employers to public education, another way of making our society subservient to business). American society seems content to leave real education to the rich and to give the rest of us scraps of job training for plebes.

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[6] "How to Grade Papers Written by AI" by Douglas Rushkoff, Medium, 2 January 2023. https://rushkoff.medium.com/how-to-grade-papers-written-by-ai-4277a78a892

Still, even in a time of crass and empty social visions, administrators could conceive their role as not to enforce academic hunger games but rather to protect and serve the integrity of the academic mission. The academic mission is, after all, the whole reason we have colleges in the first place.

This does happen, and it happens in unexpected places. Sometimes the administrators who are best at achieving such a public vision are ones in the most difficult circumstances. I recently heard a community college president in a rural New England place (one of the most economically destitute areas of the state and a school without many resources) say that the school's Education major was not doing well in terms of enrollment (none are right now), but they're continuing to support it vigorously because that major is central to their mission as a school.

That's academic integrity.

Magical Ethics

Beyond a sense of mission, purpose, and vision, perhaps we could also help communicate the idea of academic integrity as an ethic.

I think here of magicians. There is an unspoken code of ethics between performers of magic. In his book *How Magicians Think*, Joshua Jay explains well how it works. Most magicians are hugely generous with each other. They guard their secrets from the public, because their performances depend on that secrecy, but most magicians also love teaching their effects to serious students and colleagues. There are long lineages of effects and techniques passed down through generations of magicians, almost like how dharma is passed through generations of Buddhist teachers and students. But there is also an unspoken, absolute rule that the only person who can reveal a trick is the person who invented it, and another unspoken, absolute rule that you do not perform anyone else's effects or

techniques without permission. Violating these rules once will likely spark a conversation — a cease and desist request — while violating them repeatedly will lead to exile. As Joshua Jay says, the magic community is small, and known offenders get shunned, which can mean the end of a career.

We're talking about professional magicians there, not students. Students of magic have to learn both the techniques and the ethics. Most importantly, they need to learn the *purpose* of the ethics. Magicians have kept their code for centuries because everyone who enters the magic community learns the logic, understands how it supports the community, and knows that ultimately it helps them as individuals.

Academia may not need to be so severe when dealing with people of bad intentions, but there are real reasons why we are aghast at fraud. Beyond the core reasons for not supporting fraud, there are also lots of interesting and complex conversations to be had about all this — conversations that could help us better communicate about the work we do and help students and the public better understand the strange world of academia. Bringing students into those conversations can both increase engagement with academic ideas and help students understand themselves as part of a scholarly community.

When I was an English teacher, I moved away from teaching a particular citation system (MLA in my case) and toward teaching the ideas behind citation: why do we do it, how is it different between different disciplines and formats, and how students might think of citation as a communication tool rather than a set of rules to memorize (and often violate). Plagiarism of course came up in those conversations, but what I discovered is that students had been taught that citation exists to avoid plagiarism, which is a bass-ackwards way of thinking of it. Yes, citation helps us avoid plagiarism. But its purpose is far more important, interesting, and useful: to make

knowledge available to other scholars, help the body of our writing stay clear, and pay acknowledgement where it is due.

By approaching citation in this way, and helping students see it as a tool they could and should make choices with, I both reduced plagiarism and, more importantly, saw students making rational, thoughtful, and creative choices about citation and their own writing. It quickly became one of my favorite lessons in classes because it became a lesson about empowerment.

Integrity as Empowerment

How, I wonder, might questions of academic integrity become lessons about empowerment?

Let's consider a prominent recent — and negative — example: #ReceptioGate. As well explained in an article by Charlotte Gauthier, the massive fraud apparently committed by a few people who created a European "research institute" called Receptio is an impressively egregious example of how academia has made bad behavior attractive and unavoidable:

> Reducing research to a numbers game incentivizes gaming the numbers, not scholarship.
>
> Unsurprisingly, the all-importance of numbers on both the individual university and higher education sector level has led in some instances to academic fraud. People set up spurious "research institutes" to capture grants, and they focus their efforts on producing derivative (if not actually plagiarized) work that can be published quickly, artificially boosting their publication metrics. This appears to have been the modus operandi of the Receptio Institute. Those who are the most skilled at playing the system are often not the ones who do the best and most important research, simply because historical research and system-gaming are two difficult-to-

> master and usually non-overlapping skill sets. Even in the normal, non-fraudulent course of events, applying for competitive grants takes huge amounts of time and effort that could be much better spent on innovative scholarship than on form-filling.[7]

What we first need to see is how discussion of academic integrity, fraud, technology, scholarship, austerity, and the public good are all interrelated. Separating one from the other may lead to tolerable immediate solutions, but it does not get to the the core of any of the problems or opportunities.

There's a growing body of research that suggests one of the key determiners of student success at an institution is a sense of belonging.[8] Rarely have I seen this sense of belonging identified as a sense of belonging to the scholarly community, but that must be part of it, because the only justification for a school to exist is for it to create, enhance, and strengthen scholarly communities. Everything else can be done at least as well and probably cheaper by other institutions. What distinguishes a school, and particularly a college or university, from every other type of institution and community on the planet is scholarship: the pursuit of knowledge.

That's the belonging that we ought to celebrate in schools. It's the belonging we ought to work to open up, to expand, to give strength to. A strong and vital scholarly community is a community with academic integrity.

Let that be our mission and vision. Let it inspire and empower us.

—January 2023

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[7] "#ReceptioGate and the (absolute) state of academia" by Charlotte Gauthier, *The Critic*, 4 January 2023. https://thecritic.co.uk/receptiogate-and-the-absolute-state-of-academia/

[8] See, for instance, "How Social Belonging Impacts Retention at Broad-Access Colleges" by Mary C. Murphy, *Third Way*, 16 December 2022. https://www.thirdway.org/report/how-social-belonging-impacts-retention-at-broad-access-colleges

Afterword (2026)

ChatGPT, large language models (LLMs), generative "AI", etc. quickly took over the world to such an extent that this chapter, one of the more recent in this book, now reads like it was written in the steam age. Still, the core ideas remain sound, I think.

As skeptical scholars of educational technology such as Audrey Watters have been saying, the problems are "AI" are, at heart, the same problems of capitalism, technology, and education that have existed for decades, if not centuries. What these new technologies do is accelerate and exacerbate the old problems.

By the time you read this, I'm sure there will be new developments in the technologies and social impacts of AI, but the fundamental problems are likely to remain, because those problems were not created by AI. If anything, AI is giving people an excuse to continue to ignore those problems even as the technology continues to make them exponentially worse.

There Is No Ethical Use of AI

Things which now get buzzed as "AI" ("artificial intelligence") — large language models, statistical prediction software, image generators, etc. — have infiltrated and infested various industries, tools, and discourses with remarkable speed and gobsmacking hype. AI (I'm not going to keep up the scare quotes, but hope you know that, as Kate Crawford says, AI is neither artificial nor intelligent)[1] has become unavoidable in digital tools, with many of our basic everyday applications now incorporating it in some way or another. The hype from the techmeisters is fierce, reminiscent of other tech bubbles past. There's even apocalypticism, with claims that the machines will accelerate human extinction.

There's no need to indulge in sci-fi fantasies of killer computers. We're doing fine at accelerating extinction without AI, and AI's mundane, actual harms are real and present dangers.

There are also good uses for some of the new tools that get called AI, and hope for more powerful uses in the future. It's fun to ask ChatGPT to do stuff and it's fun to see what uncanny assemblages image generators create. I've heard that AI tools are quite good at cleaning up audio files for podcasters. There may still be plenty of places in medicine and science where AI tools can achieve more than could be achieved before.

[1] "This Researcher Says AI Is Neither Artificial nor Intelligent" by Tom Simonite, *Wired*, 26 April 2021. https://www.wired.com/story/researcher-says-ai-not-artificial-intelligent/

Nonetheless, I believe it is basically inarguable that there is no ethical use of AI. There are some large, obvious, frequently-debated reasons, ones that any discussion of AI ought to lead with:

> 1.) This is a technology that requires tremendous resources of energy, water, infrastructure, and thus has a significant impact on the environment;
>
> 2.) AI language models are trained on huge amounts of writing that the corporations who own the tools did not get consent to use;
>
> 3.) AI image generators are based on huge amounts of art that that the corporations who own the tools did not get consent to use;
>
> 4.) AI tools are already putting artists, writers, and other workers out of work;
>
> 5.) AI tools have accelerated the demise of any ability to tell whether texts, images, sounds, and videos are human-created, thus increasing the flood of misinformation into our world by orders of magnitude.
>
> 6.) AI hype is predictably accelerating the effects of hypercapitalism, with AI now commonly proposed as a way to avoid better funding for, for instance, education and healthcare (instead of better schools and hospitals, poor people get AI teachers and nurses, while rich people get private schools and expensive doctors).

I came up with that list quickly; I'm sure there are other problems with AI, but my point here is not to list all the objections. Nor is it to say those are all incontrovertible, or, for that matter, unsolvable. We could deal with jobs made irrelevant by AI with initiatives for guaranteed income, health care, and

housing, for instance, so nobody has to rely on employment to survive.

Any of the five problems I list are arguable, but here's the point: **If you think even *one* of those items is an ethical problem, then the conclusion must be that there is no ethical use of AI.**

This is not to argue that you should not use AI tools, that people who use AI are bad, etc. Rather, it's about the choices we make. Not using AI seems to me an easy choice. It is not a sacrifice.

We all do countless unethical things every single day, but most of the time we would have to sacrifice at least a bit of comfort and happiness to be more ethical. We can be truly concerned that materials in our cell phones and computers are both harmful for the environment and mined and assembled by people in exploitative and likely even dangerous conditions, including children in mines[2] — and we can still choose, as I do, to prioritize having computers and cell phones over those workers' comfort, health, and ability to live. People like myself are, in Bruce Robbins's formulation, beneficiaries of the world's systems — systems which create much destruction, and to which many other people's lives are sacrificed.[3]

I also admit there is little to no ethical use of social media, and yet I do use it. I cannot ethically justify my continued use of products owned by obscenely wealthy people, products and people that are destroying democracy, society, and the planet's biosphere. I get some enjoyment from these tools from seeing what friends and family are up to, and find the tools useful when I need to promote events, writing, etc. But I would be a fool to argue that my use of social media is in any way ethically justified.

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[2] See *Cobalt Red: How the Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives* by Siddharth Kara (St. Martin's Press, 2023).

[3] Bruce Robbins, *The Beneficiary*, Duke University Press, 2017.

I say all this not for purposes of self-flagellation, but to admit the bind for any of us who are not saints and who do hold onto our (ethically dubious) lifestyles. However, I do not think we deserve a get-out-of-jail-free card. We don't get to say, "I am a white, middle-class American and intend to continue to live that lifestyle, and since my life is already a blight upon the planet, I get to do whatever I want!"

No, we all make choices and try to live with those choices. Sometimes, the maintenance of the general social order becomes the basic ethical organizing principal of our lives: my taxes may contribute to weapons manufacturers and armies that kill people every day, but I don't think that gives me the right to go shoot my neighbor if I find them annoying.[4] Beyond a general commitment to the social order, one way we live with ourselves when trapped in the bind of an inherently unethical life is by also making ethical choices when and how we can, trying to balance things out to the best of our ability with the least amount of sacrifice. Doing a little tiny bit less harm is still doing less harm — even if we could, if we wanted to, do a lot less harm.

Avoiding (to the best of your ability) the tools that get called AI is really not much of a sacrifice for most people. Thus, it seems to me an easy ethical win. When possible, just don't use it. It won't always be possible. It's baked into too much. But you don't need to provide aid and encouragement to it. You don't need to pretend it's a complex ethical quandary that deserves close academic study. It doesn't. Your use of AI harms the world. You can choose to avoid that harm and give up very, very little.

[4] I've written elsewhere about the ways in which being part of the liberal order means outsourcing the violence that sustains your life. See "Difficult Peace", *The Mumpsimus,* 27 May 2022. https://mumpsimus.blogspot.com/2022/05/difficult-peace.html

Is there a way to move beyond the passive, vaguely ethical choice to avoid AI as best you can and into an active, more ethical resistance? I don't know. I continue to think about this — writing this post is my first step. I want to encourage more people to make the choice not to use AI. But then what?

I would be happy to take on the label of Luddite, though I have not earned it, since I have not (yet) smashed any machines. It's a rather Romantic concept, a bit too filled with the idealism of individual action than a real analysis of systems of oppression; and, in any case, the Luddites lost. Still, the vision of a world that understands technology as both inescapably political and inescapably related to questions of labor and exploitation is an important vision to present. I take seriously James Muldoon's statement in a discussion of neo-Luddism that

> Some workers have increased their autonomy due to new technology such as workers now able to work from home or perform routine tasks with greater ease. Additionally, many new technologies actually do make our lives more convenient, but are often combined with mechanisms that surveil and extract value from us. Understanding how to unravel these complications requires more than a simple opposition to new technology.[5]

There is in fact a possibility for AI to reduce burdensome (often bureaucratic) work, especially if it can become more reliable in its outputs. But this sidesteps some questions: Is AI a tool for making bullshit jobs seem less bullshitty? Is a bullshit job still bullshit if a computer tool does most of it? Maybe it is, and maybe that's actually a good thing, because perhaps if we have no chance of ending bullshit jobs, at least we can offload them to the algorithms.

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[5] "Fully Decelerated Carbon-Neutral Luddism" by James Muldoon, Verso Books blog, 26 April 2021. https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/5066-fully-decelerated-carbon-neutral-luddism

My favorite example of this is the loop created by students using ChatGPT and teachers also using AI to grade student work. This frees students and teachers both to do more interesting and productive things, including perhaps new conversations about all the bullshit work of teaching and learning. If assignments in school can so easily be handled by algorithms and statistical language prediction, then perhaps those assignments are, in fact, a waste of everybody's time, and we should just give them to the machines.

The question of resistance to AI is really a question of how to resist the current order of society, an order we can call late capitalism or neoliberalism or technocratic financialism or the triumph of the billionaire techbros. My decision to answer the question of whether to use AI with the Bartlebyian response "I would prefer not to" is not a decision that will have any noticeable effect on the world or provide any real resistance to the forces immiserating many millions of people and destroying the biosphere itself.

I don't have an answer for how to resist the forces of hypercapitalism and ecocide in any effective way. This morning, writing this, I am thinking of the preface to the English-language edition of Kōhei Saitō's book *Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto*, which I've just begun reading. In that preface, Saitō tells the story of a Japanese man who approached him after a lecture, saying he had been convinced by Saitō's ideas, that he wanted to do something to make the rubber trading company he owned less destructive to the planet and society, but he didn't know what to do. Saitō writes:

> …actually, the answer to his question was in my book as well as in my lecture. Perhaps he had overlooked it or wanted another one that involved less change. My answer was that he should sign his business over to its employees. Since capitalism is the ultimate cause of climate breakdown, it is necessary to transition to a steady-state economy.

> All companies therefore need to become cooperatives or cease trading.[6]

"Easier said than done!" is the inevitable response, but the response to that response must be: Why? What prevents you, the owner of a business, from making it a workers' cooperative? (I will leave aside the question of whether that would help stave off the destruction of the biosphere, a question on which I am ignorant. I do think workers' cooperatives are better than traditional capitalism, but that's because I believe in the idea of *from each according to their ability to each according to their need*, which is another way to say: the golden rule.) If you really want to make a change for the good, why don't you? The billionaires who rule the world do not make this choice — Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk could end world hunger, but instead they choose to buy yachts and space rockets — but this does not mean you have to be as terrible a person as them. You can change your life, you can change your business. You just have to *actually* want to, or else stop lying to yourself.

But no, I do not know how to resist the all-consuming monster that is the way of life for people like myself and people who are richer and more powerful than myself. I do not know how to convince billionaires to stop funding vanity projects and instead contribute to the good of the world that let them become absurdly rich. I do not know how to change the structures that empower billionaires, the structures that make billionaires possible. I do not know how to overcome the fact that all the systems and instincts of society prevent us from using the knowledge and resources we have to make life quite pleasant for most if not all of the people currently alive.

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[6] Saitō, *Slow Down*, ix.

What I know is that AI's use of resources is fundamentally destructive, and that abstaining from using such tools isn't really much of a sacrifice. Therefore, whenever given a choice, I will choose not to use the tools that get called AI.

—March 2024

Afterword (2026)

In August 2025, I wrote a post on my website titled "There Is (Still) No Ethical Use of AI", which updates this essay with a lot of new references to the various terrible things "AI" does to the environment, people's brains, our lives.[7] It's something that needs to live online, though, because virtually every sentence includes a link to something else online.

I should note here that the chapter "Into the Fugitive Open" includes a discussion of Open Access and AI under the section title "The OA Problem of AI Is Not a Problem of OA or AI", and one argument I make there is worth repeating in summary here.

AI's problems are not inherent to AI or to technology in general. They are caused by the structures of the world we live in, the structures of the world into which this technology is born and released. Yes, solutions would likely slow down the development and/or deployment of this technology — requiring, for instance, that all data centers get their energy from fully renewable sources would limit access to the total amount of energy that AI currently demands. Various ways of escaping capitalism would be annoying to the tech billionaires who currently benefit from capitalism's exploitative abilities, but that's

[7] The post is available at https://matthewcheney.net/blog/there-is-still-no-ethical-use-of-ai/

the problem: we've let billionaires design and manage the system that benefits them (and only them). Getting people with no background in education away from every school and making public education free from pre-K through PhD would help make questions of AI and education (and so many other questions!) a lot easier to deal with.

Ultimately, I do believe we are going to have to look to something like degrowth communism if we want humanity to survive into the future, but even that would not prohibit AI; instead, it would put meaningful restrictions on it, making the technology serve people rather than people serve the technology.

FIVE

Show & Tell

Last weekend, I took an online seminar led by Garth Greenwell, one of my favorite contemporary American writers, titled “Some Recent Queer Aesthetics”. It was glorious and exactly what I needed — during the pandemic, for various reasons, I’ve been feeling disconnected from both body and being, disconnected from communities, and, more than anything, disconnected from my artistic self. Feeling, in short, a whole lot more flat than fabulous. The seminar did wonders for all that, but it also got me thinking about learning and teaching during this strange era.

Greenwell did nothing innovative with the format of the course — it was traditional in pedagogical style, and used only online tools that are now pretty familiar to anybody who’s been online recently — and yet it was still a course I am going to remember, and profit from, for a long time.

The two technologies the course used were Zoom and YouTube. Greenwell explained that while we’d be looking at some pictures via the screenshare function in Zoom, in his experience, trying to share videos via a shared Zoom screen is tough, so when we needed to look at a YouTube video together, he shared the link via the chat function.

When we began, Greenwell had us take a few minutes to practice some of the Zoom functions we would be using, primarily the “raise hand” function, but also the icons for raising hands and clapping. Most of the 50 people in the seminar were relatively experienced with Zoom, but this exercise — we all practiced raising and lowering our virtual hands, and clapping

— felt weirdly good to me, the little community-building gesture of doing something super-low-stakes all together, waiting for everybody to be able to do it, helping people who were confused, until we were all set and ready to go. Those of us who had experience with these functions could feel good about ourselves ("Ha ha, I am a Zoom Master!"), while people who were uncertain about the technology could feel supported. It was a tiny thing, and if you had told me beforehand that I would find it to be anything other than slightly annoying, I would not have believed you. We talk a lot about the challenge of creating and sustaining community in online courses, but maybe it's not the giant impossibility that so much of the rhetoric around online teaching makes it seem? I mean, we didn't create a community in that moment by finding and using the "raise hand" button or by playing with the silly clap icon … but it did feel (to me, at least) like we *could* create a community after that exercise.

This idea connects to the work of one of the artists we spent some time talking about in the seminar, Taylor Mac. I had known of Mac's work before, and had been sad to have to miss an opportunity to see part of the legendary *24-Decade History of Popular Music* a few years ago, but hadn't connected at a deep level to Mac's work until Greenwell shared with us a video I had not previously seen of a 2007 performance, a video that has become one of my favorite things in the universe.)[1] At performances of *The 24-Decade History of Popular Music*, audience members had to do things together: throw ping-pong balls, dance with someone of the same gender, etc. This was both challenging and exciting for them, silly and serious. Knowing myself, I know I would have hated the first and

[1] Available on YouTube as "Taylor Mac - 'But I Loved Him' (Soho Theatre, London, 2007)" at https://youtu.be/__IcwUzLN50?si=WftioND1VsZ5a5rJ. The *24-Decade History of Popular Music* was the subject of an exciting documentary by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, *Taylor Mac's 24-Decade History of Popular Music* (2023), providing a brief taste of an extraordinary and unique theatrical/community event.

maybe even second moment of audience participation, whatever it was, and then, the ice in my cold and empty soul broken, I would have loved the whole thing and everybody around me.[2]

Once we all had practiced some of the basic functions of Zoom, the seminar proceeded as a lecture, with various illustrations and videos, and with a couple of pauses for questions. That was the format. Greenwell would talk about some ideas for a bit, we'd watch a video or look at a picture, and he'd stop and let people raise their hands to ask questions (or post questions in the chat, either privately to him if they wanted them to be anonymous, or to the whole group). It lasted a bit over 3 hours and was riveting.

That it was riveting had to do with a few things. First, great content: Greenwell's ideas were provocative and inspiring, and his choice of material to explore was varied and surprising. Second, even though at its core this was a lecture, it never felt lecture-y because of the way we moved around between the different artifacts (videos, music, pictures, poems, and a short story we'd read in preparation for the seminar). There was nothing for us necessarily to *do*, per se, which is why I think of

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[2] Here's something Mac said in an interview with Garth Greenwell that I also think is important to a lot of what we do, especially now: "What I've learned by touring and performing and living a life as a performing artist is that when something bad happens, it's also an opportunity for something incredible to happen. Sometimes it happens in the next moment, and other times it happens in the next week, in the next performance. I call it incorporating calamity, and it's about transforming it—when something horrible happens, you turn it into something useful. That's what the entire show is about—how communities are torn apart but because they're torn apart, they're also rebuilt. That has happened in the United States over and over again. It comes from the AIDS activism I saw, where an entire queer community is devastated by the epidemic and by the government's response to it and by their families' response to them. But meanwhile, they're building themselves because they're all gathered to fight this thing together and to take care of each other."
—"Hero's Journey: An Interview with Taylor Mac by Garth Greenwell." *The Paris Review*, 25 June 2018.
https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/06/25/heros-journey-an-interview-with-taylor-mac/.

it as at core a lecture, but the variety of material and the opportunity to ask questions was enough. Ask questions … but not have a discussion. Some people might have been put off by this — the seminar was very much a one-way affair, with us as the receivers and Greenwell as the presenter — but I think it helped keep things coherent, especially given how much material we had to work with. Anyway, we, the audience, could participate, but we (or, at least, I) had not paid good money to hear the extended opinions of people other than Garth Greenwell.

At the end, Greenwell hung out until everybody who wanted to ask a question had a chance to. And then it was done. And I've been thinking about it all ever since.

One of the things Greenwell said early on stuck with me, and is key to the pedagogic success of the seminar, I think. He said that show & tell is his ideal of instruction because show & tell is fundamentally libidinal, and its fundamental mode is delight.

I'll try to elaborate on his idea and see where it can take us: There is, in show & tell, an energy fueled by desire. The pedagogy is simple and powerful: *Here is something I love. Here is why I love it. Thank you for letting me show it to you. What is something you love? Why? Thank you for showing that to me.*

We didn't have time in the seminar to get to the second part, but you could in a longer course — students sharing what has meaning for them, what they have discovered, what they are drawn to in the subject matter.

This idea reminds me of two science courses I took in high school, one of which was awful, the other of which I soon gave my heart and soul to, and which still influences my life now, more than a quarter century later. The first (awful) course was biology, the second was ecology. The biology teacher made us do such exciting activities as memorize all the muscles of a frog. The ecology teacher shared with us his fear for the future

of the world, read to us from Rachel Carson and Edward Abbey, tried out experiments with us that he wasn't sure would work, etc. The first class had nothing of show & tell. It was the teacher teaching how he'd always taught, getting us through the textbook, grading us on our memorization, leading us through ghastly dissections that showed no love for the animals whose bodies we were tearing apart. The ecology class was almost all show & tell. It was messy. Lessons went awry. Experiments fizzled (we tried doing a population count on local birds and, for reasons I don't remember, the whole thing just completely failed). But we never doubted that the teacher cared about every topic introduced in that course, and he encouraged us to find ways to care, too, and to share that caring with each other. It didn't matter when lessons or activities became messy and inconclusive, because we knew why we were there, we knew what matter to our teacher and to ourselves, and we kept trying to find more information and knowledge that could connect to what we already cared about. (Also, we learned that science can be messy and inconclusive. A useful lesson, itself!)[3]

I don't have a settled (or unsettled) theory of all this yet, but in the spirit of show & tell, I am putting it out there.

In summary, then, here are some of the features that made Garth Greenwell's seminar so powerful for me:

[3] One interesting thing about these courses is that the first (awful) one was taught by someone who I'm sure thought he was a pretty good teacher, and the second was taught by someone who doubted himself the whole time and ended up thinking the course was a failure (which I didn't discover until, a year or two later, I told him how much it had meant to me).

1 Clarity and simplicity of tools.

2 Low-stakes practice with the tools before we began the material of the course and needed to use those tools.

3 Rich, provocative content that was thoughtfully organized and presented in a meaningful sequence.

4 Varied types of content that allowed a mostly monodirectional mode of learning to feel dynamic.

5 Opportunities to ask questions in a variety of modes: full video, public chat, private chat to the teacher.

6 Show & tell as a pedagogical philosophy. We were there to learn, yes, and to challenge ourselves, certainly, and but we were also there to experience the delight of experiencing things that at least gave the teacher real pleasure, and he then tried to convey that pleasure to us. (And it worked! Pieces I might not have paid a lot of attention to otherwise, I found a way in and am still exploring now that I have more time to experience them and think about them.)

What I like about this is that it doesn't require any pedagogical genius to create it. I think Greenwell is a truly extraordinary writer and thinker, but I don't think he has a particularly greater-than-average ability as a teacher — and that's important. Great, genius teachers exist. But we need pedagogies that ordinary teachers can carry out, because most of us are ordinary.

As I am thinking about how to reconfigure my courses during a pandemic, I'm going to keep thinking about what a powerful experience this simply-presented class was for me. It would be easy to fall into the trap of thinking I need to figure out a bunch of complex technology, that I need to somehow solve a bunch of unsolvable problems of remote learning, that

I need to be superhuman. But I don't. I've already got plenty of good content and goals. I need to keep things as simple as possible to be able to convey the content and approach the goals. I need to not let the inevitable messiness make me think I am failing (and if I *am* failing, I need to embrace the failure and figure out a way to use it). I need to provide variety of content and of ways of accessing it, engaging with it, expanding it. I need to come up with low-stakes ways for us to do things together as a class. I need to show and tell, and I need to encourage students to do the same. To find delight.

—July 2020

Instead of Rigor: Play and Risk

How Does *Rigor* Mean?

Among educators, the word *rigor* often has a talismanic power. That power may come from a fact Maha Bali once pointed out on Twitter: it is an empty word, like *quality, achievement*, and *excellence*.

If it were only empty, though, it would not have the power it has. Like those other words, it is empty but exudes a positive aura. Who, after all, wants to say, "My teaching isn't rigorous."

And yet when we look at the practices that get called *rigorous*, we see that *rigor* is often a synonym for cruelty. (It may, too, have a macho inflection. No surprise, given the phallic implications of *rigor*. If your rigor lasts more than three hours, call a physician!) Rigor becomes an alibi. You hear it from teachers who, for one reason or another, feel self-conscious or defensive about their teaching — from teachers, for instance, whose students fail more often than they succeed. Practices that should be questioned and probably discarded get defended as evidence of rigor.

Sometimes, we want to defend *our* idea of rigor as real rigor, and somebody else's as fake rigor. ("Real rigor," we might say, "is empathetic. It helps strengthen students, not fill them with fear and self-hatred.") I'm not sure that's the right approach, though, because my inclination when words get soggy

with competing definitions is to seek other, less saturated, words. Soggy words too easily hide bad habits.

Shunning the word *rigor*, or seeking to give it more of a negative connotation, might help show that alternative approaches exist.

Play and Risk

In a reflection recently on the major he created through our Interdisciplinary Studies program, a student in my senior seminar course wrote about two qualities he's interested in exploring in life: *play* and *risk*. His major is a mix of Adventure Education and Psychology, and he wants to use what he has learned through wilderness training to help people with psychological needs. What he has learned tells him that success will require people to embrace both play and risk.

I've long considered play essential to education (and to life, for that matter). I spent a good portion of my earlier life in the theatre, where play is a serious business. (Sometimes, impatient and authoritarian theatre directors forget about the play part of plays and instead substitute their own idea of rigor: yelling at actors and technicians, sometimes demeaning them, even seeing it as a sign of achievement when they reduced people to tears. Working with such directors led to some of my earliest questioning of the idea of rigor.) Teaching writing, I've found almost nothing as effective at getting students to write more effectively and creatively than to encourage them toward a sense of play. Both learning and living, for me, require play.

But *risk*? There's an interesting question. I suppose I've considered the idea of risk in relationship to the idea of failure — and the absolute need for education to encourage and support failure, since experiments without possibility of failure are not good experiments, and education ought to be experimental, and failure is a pretty common experience in most of our lives, and often we are so terrified of failure that it

gets in the way of our progress, and sometimes education impedes that progress by punishing any hint of failure — but I had never made the connection directly.

I suppose I have not considered risk much because I consider myself risk-averse. Yet when I reflect on this, what I realize is more that I have areas in which I am highly comfortable with risk, and areas where I am not. If I think back over my education, particularly, the times when I have flourished have been times when I have accepted and even sought out risk. Not blind risk, not foolish risk, but a kind of informed risk, the risk the includes a sense of the stakes, a sense of what is at risk. For me, primarily intellectual risk, as physical risk is what brings my caution most to the forefront. It could be, in fact, that my strong aversion to physical risk has better enabled my willingness to plunge toward intellectual risk. I don't know.

There is, of course, risk in everything. One of the lessons of any adventure/wilderness training is what to do about risk, including the psychological response to risk. How can risk be managed? How can it be made into something productive, not destructive; something energizing, not enervating — something that leads to the best sort of defensiveness rather than the kind of defensiveness that induces stasis or a fight-or-flight reaction.

Managing risk means managing fear. We know that fear is a great obstacle to learning (see Joshua Eyler's *How Humans Learn* for more on this), but we also know that we learn well through new experiences that reach far enough beyond what we already know that we've got to stretch to understand. Learning requires the risk of challenge, the risk of failure, the risk of reaching toward the unknown and maybe even the incomprehensible.

But we also know that there is an ideal zone for such learning, a zone wherein the challenging, unknown, and maybe incomprehensible does not stretch so far beyond our current

frame of knowledge that it is impossible to reconcile with some part of that current frame of knowledge. Nor is it something that provokes more fear and anxiety than it does curiosity. This is very much like the Vygotskian zone of proximal development — a zone of proximal learning.[1] Helping students find their zone of proximal learning, and work within it (developing it, expanding it) is one of the great goals of education.

What if we set the idea of *rigor* aside and instead talked about *play* and *risk* in our work? What if, instead of asking how rigorous our classes are, we asked instead how those classes encourage play and manage risk to help students enlarge their zone of proximal learning?

What if we valued teachers not for the rigor they stick to, but the ways they use play and risk to build a practice that is flexible, unpredictable, and always evolving?

What if, instead of assessing students on how well they reach our unbending goals, we instead assess how well they play with the concepts they encounter, how much and how responsibly (and creatively!) they take risks with those concepts?

At least as importantly: How might our institutions change if we substituted ideas of play and risk for ideas of rigor?

As Ani DiFranco once sang: "Buildings and bridges are made to bend in the wind…"

✦

Thanks to Henry Huang for first linking play and risk for me.

—September 2020

[1] The Wikipedia page for "Zone of Proximal Development" has a good overview and references:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zone_of_proximal_development

Extending the Mind

Our brains are astoundingly powerful organs. For decades, if not centuries, scientists have tried to figure out what makes them so amazingly good at doing what they do. Brains are extremely good at, in Annie Murphy Paul's words, "sensing and moving the body, navigating through space, and connecting with other humans." Recently, scientists have begun to look at something different: the brain's limitations.[1] "The human brain," Paul writes in *The Extended Mind*, "is limited in its ability to pay attention, limited in its capacity to remember, limited in its facility with abstract concepts, and limited in its power to persist at a challenging task."[2] This is true even of the most astoundingly talented brains. Geniuses are not so much people with extraordinary brains as people who have found particularly good ways to work within their limitations and to extend their brain beyond itself.

Extending the brain means working toward those things brains are really good at while adjusting for the things brains tend to be limited by. What Paul shows, though, is that so many of the structures of our lives (including the physical structures) do quite the opposite. Too often, for instance, we ignore the brain's embodiment. Too often, we privilege the idea of individual genius and miss the far greater potential for group genius. Too often, we create binaries that demand we be either social or private when, in fact, the best thinking requires the

[1] Annie Murphy Paul, *The Extended Mind* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021), 245.
[2] Paul,, 2.

opportunity to be both. Additionally, we apply terribly inaccurate metaphors for how brains work, proposing that brains are like muscles or like computers, when they are not like either at all, and these metaphors lead us to work not with our brains but against them.

By working against our brains, we create workplaces, living situations, and classrooms that require us to put forth far more energy and effort than we would need if we designed with evidence-based knowledge of the brain (and its embodiment) rather than designing via myths and habits. Often, in a quest for productivity and efficiency, we make systems that work against both productivity and efficiency.

Consider:

> Schools don't teach students how to restore their depleted attention with exposure to nature and the outdoors, or how to arrange their study spaces so that they extend intelligent thought. Teachers and managers don't demonstrate how abstract ideas can be turned into physical objects that can be manipulated and transformed in order to achieve insights and solve problems. Employees aren't shown how the social practices of imitation and vicarious learning can shortcut the process of acquiring expertise. Classroom groups and workplace teams aren't coached in scientifically validated methods of increasing the collective intelligence of their members. Our ability to think outside the brain has been left almost entirely uneducated and undeveloped.[3]

That might be a bit hyperbolic — I know of classes and workplaces in which some of those things are, indeed, taught, though perhaps not with the language here, and, importantly, not with the intention and clarity about how brains work. If

[3] Paul, 4.

these things are taught to students and workers, it's because they have proved effective in the past, or they've been stumbled on as good practices. Paul's point is that we shouldn't need to stumble. We have piles of good research from the last few decades into how brains actually work. Or, if not how brains work (much remains mysterious!), what they like and don't like.

Here, then, I will detail some — but far from all — of what Paul writes about in *The Extended Mind*, and at the end I will offer some ideas that particularly stood out for me when thinking about the context of schools and education.

Bodies with Knowledge

Brains don't think as well in bodies sitting still as they do in bodies performing some sort of low-intensity motion. We know this intuitively — think of how many people, for instance, say they get their best ideas while walking — and yet so many classrooms and workplaces are designed to inhibit movement, designed on the premise that people think best while sitting still. Low-intensity movement improves attention and focus (as anybody who has used fidget toys during meetings knows), and yet we not only don't design for it, we punish it. "Parents and teachers often believe they have to get kids to stop moving around before they can focus and get down to work," Paul writes. But "a more constructive approach would be to allow kids to move around *so that* they can focus."[4]

High-intensity movement has its own value, including as preparation for significant mental work: "The best preparation for such (metaphorical) acts as wrestling with ideas or running through possibilities is to work up an (actual) sweat."[5] One of the values of significant physical assertion for our brains is that it stops us from (consciously) thinking. The body is demanding all your concentration, so you are not getting mentally depleted

[4] Paul, 49.
[5] Paul, 52.

in the same way that, for instance, unfocused internet surfing depletes the brain even as it feels like the opposite of work. The problem is that activities like endlessly scrolling through social media feeds draw energy from the same parts of the brain as do more cognitively challenging tasks. If we "rest" via the internet and then return to work, we "resume our duties just as frazzled as before the pause, and maybe more so. Turning coffee breaks into what some public health experts call 'movement breaks' allows us to return to our work a bit smarter than when we left it."[6]

Small motions are so important that Paul devotes an entire chapter to the value of gestures. "Gestures," she says, "don't merely echo or amplify spoken language; they carry out cognitive and communicative functions that language can't touch."[7] Gestures strengthen our ability to give form to thoughts, they increase the effectiveness of communication, they help groups understand each other, they create and direct attention.

Physicality is crucial for memory. Paul looks at some studies of how actors memorize lines, and the results confirmed my own theatre experience: it is vastly easier to remember your lines when you have rehearsed them on stage than when you just try to memorize them yourself. The addition of movement and gesture makes it much easier to recall blocks of text. The gestures don't have to be illustrative, and there's even demonstrated improval to memory when the intention to move is there without any accompanying movement. The body tells the brain: this is important. "Our natural egocentric bias," Paul writes, "leads us to preferentially attend to and remember that information that we have connected in some way to ourselves: my intention, my body, my movement."[8]

Again and again, Paul shows that thinking doesn't happen only in the brain — it happens throughout the whole body. Our

[6] Paul, 52.
[7] Paul, 69.
[8] Paul, 57.

bodies know things our brains do not bring to consciousness. She describes a fascinating experiment by Antonio Damasio's team at the University of Southern California where participants' bodies showed clear understanding of the patterns of reward in a card game without the participants themselves being conscious of any pattern at all. This is the basis of "gut instincts". Paul shows research to consistently demonstrate that people with greater sensitivity to their bodies (particularly via interoception) are better able to use the knowledge their bodies produce. And this is not simply a talent, though some people are certainly better at it than others. It can be taught and strengthened via meditation, for instance.

This awareness of the body can help not only with knowledge but also with one of those things teachers keep saying they want to see in more students: resilience. Paul is no fan of the "growth mindset" or "grit" school of educational theory, which she believes is based on the misleading metaphor of the brain as a muscle. (The brain, Paul proposes, is more like a magpie than a muscle.) Paul tells the story of researchers who have studied extremely accomplished athletes, including the extraordinary long-distance swimmer Diana Nyad. These are people of impressive resilience, and their brains show it by responding in anticipation to stressors and then entering "a state of relative quiescence *during* and *after* the stressor." People without such resilience respond in the opposite manner: "low levels of [brain] activity *before* a stressor, and high levels *during* and *after* the stressor. The self-management of these individuals is sloppy, all over the place, like poorly calibrated motors that leak power. They are brought up short by challenges, and then waste energy in the scramble to catch up."[9] The management of energy within bodies and minds is key to success and failure of most tasks, including thinking. Again and again, research shows people ignoring,

[9] Paul, 35.

overriding, or simply being unaware of their bodies, thus causing themselves unnecessary suffering. Researchers who have studied stock traders and soldiers have found consistent results: people who "pay close attention to their bodily sensations *at the early stage* of a challenge, when signs of stress are just beginning to accumulate" are less likely to be taken by surprise, less likely to overreact, less likely to waste energy.[10]

For me, the insights about embodied thought and thinking in motion were among the most surprising, and in some ways most disconcerting, of the book. I am not a physical person — quite the opposite. I've often thought that if it were possible to just be a brain in a jar, I would be happy to be a brain in a jar. For me, physical sensation mostly runs on a spectrum from hideously painful to neutral. I have never had the experience of exercise being anything other than nauseating, and I find sweat to be repulsive. And yet I like thinking, and I cannot deny that the brain is deeply (obviously!) connected to and integral with the entire body, that thing I loathe.

As I resisted Paul's insights on just how embodied thinking is, I wondered about something outside the scope of her book, which is neurodivergence. *The Embodied Mind* looks at a wide range of studies that all seem to search for the qualities, behaviors, and tendencies of a typical mind. The typical mind, like the typical body, is a statistical figment, an abstraction from tens, hundreds, thousands, and millions of individual minds and bodies, each atypical in its own way. What happens, for instance, to the extended mind of someone with significant physical limitations? (Stephen Hawking seems to have extended his mind pretty well.) A fascinating sequel to Paul's book might be something along the lines of Oliver Sacks's writings, a study of neurodivergence, atypicality, and what they can

[10] Paul, 36.

tell us about how we live, learn, and work. As fascinating as the similarities between brains are the differences.

Spaces for Thought

If, as Paul's narrative of neuroscience shows, brains think not only beyond their own boundaries but also beyond the boundaries of our bodies, then the physical environments in which we think matter. This is true not only for the design of spaces, but also for the way those spaces interact with nature.

One of the most powerful insights of *The Extended Mind* is that we have built much of the world in a way that works against ourselves:

> We've set up camp amid the high-rises and highways of our modern milieu, but our minds are not at ease in this habitat. The mismatch between the stimuli we evolved to process and the sights and sounds that regularly confront our senses has the effect of depleting our limited mental resources. We are left frazzled, fatigued, and prone to distraction, simply as a function of the hours we spend in a setting for which we are biologically ill-equipped.[11]

Consider the open-plan office. This is not a space for thinking, not a space for happy or efficient brains. The minimalist, repetitive, grey design removes the visual stimuli of nature, stimuli our brains are most comfortably attuned to, and which fit in a comfort zone between too little and too much stimulation (at least there are the windows to the far left). The lighting is monotone, unvarying, not natural enough, sapping energy and focus. There are no walls, not even any partitions between work spaces, which is fine for group work but disastrous for getting anything done individually — opportunities for privacy

[11] Paul, 92.

are crucial for any creative or complex thinking, and workers who never have stable space of their own are less productive, less confident, and less happy than workers who do.

And yet, Paul says, by the early years of this century, 70-80% of offices had an open-plan design. Why? Cost, for one thing. (Walls get expensive.) But even for offices where cost was no impediment, there were assumptions about how people work, assumptions about what promotes collaboration — assumptions that were not supported by research. What Paul shows is that productive, creative offices do indeed need open spaces within which people can encounter each other and work together, but they *also* need spaces for privacy, solitary reflection, and quiet. Moreover, these spaces need to be stable and able to be personalized because "when people occupy spaces that they consider their own, they experience themselves as more confident and capable. They are more efficient and productive. They are more focused and less distractible."[12] Employers that promote desk-jumping, moving employees around all the time, cause brain-busting chaos. There is also a tendency toward consensus: "When we're constantly in touch with others, we all end up gravitating toward the same pretty-good-but-not-great answers."[13] Creativity and productivity do indeed require a room of one's own.

We need to come out of our rooms just as much as we go into them, though. We are social creatures, and our brains work well in spaces that allow an easy flow between the private and the communal, spaces that promote encounters while allowing for respite from distractions. This is especially important in the digital era, when it is easy for people to feel disconnected, even disembodied. Paul cites the work of MIT's Thomas Allen, whose "Allen Curve" states that physical

[12] Paul, 126.
[13] Paul, 128.

distance between work spaces reduces and then negates collaboration and interaction. A 2017 study of MIT faculty over ten years showed "a network topology and community structure that reveals spatial versus institutional collaboration bias; and 2. a persistent relationship between proximity and collaboration."[14] (MIT has a long history of thinking about how built spaces can promote collaboration and interdisciplinary work — their "infinite corridor", which dates back to the early 20th century, is discussed in *The Extended Mind*.)

Paul points out that monasteries are well designed for thinking and collaboration: "In the popular imagination, monks are solitary, hermit-like creatures — but historically they have lived within a communal setting that balanced time spent alone in study and contemplation with time spent with others in robust social interaction."[15] Jonas Salk and Louis Kahn knew this as they designed the Salk Institute, which Paul highlights, and which Luke Fiederer described for *ArchDaily* in 2017:

> Kahn's scheme for the Institute is spatially orchestrated in a similar way to a monastery: a secluded intellectual community. Three zones were to stand apart, all facing the ocean to the west: the Meeting House, the Village, and the laboratories. The Meeting House was to be a large community and conference venue, while the Village was to have provided living quarters; each part of the complex would then have been separated from its parallel neighbors by a water garden. Ultimately, the

[14] Claudel, Matthew, Emanuele Massaro, Paolo Santi, Fiona Murray, and Carlo Ratti. "An Exploration of Collaborative Scientific Production at MIT through Spatial Organization and Institutional Affiliation." *PloS One* 12, no. 6 (2017): 1. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0179334.
[15] Paul, 128.

> Meeting House and Village were cut from the project, and only the laboratories were built.[16]

Thinking With: Experts, Peers, Groups

The third section of *The Extended Mind* is titled "Thinking with Our Relationships", and here Paul devotes chapters to three types of relationships: those with experts, those with peers, those with groups. There is more here than I have time or need to detail, but a few ideas are particularly worth highlighting, especially as they relate to education.

As throughout the book, Paul encourages us in this section to reconsider some of our deepest assumptions about what makes for good learning and working. Two of the biggest assumptions she challenges are our (by which I mean, in particular, those of us in the US academy) derogation of imitation and our valorization of individual "genius".

Imitation, Paul says, allows us to think with other people's brains. It is a key technique — globally and transhistorically — for learning, from babies imitating parents to apprentices imitating masters. And yet imitation is seen in contemporary US society, and schooling especially, as so debased that it is frequently punished. In fact, if Paul is correct (and I think she is, and have thought so for years when teaching writing), we should build imitation into many more of our lesson plans.

Imitation is not easy. "It rarely entails automatic or mindless duplication. Rather, it requires cracking a sophisticated code — solving what social scientists call the 'correspondence problem,' or the challenge of adapting an imitated solution to the particulars of a new situation. … It's paradoxical but true: imitating well demands a considerable degree of creativity."[17]

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[16] Fiederer, Luke. "AD Classics: Salk Institute / Louis Kahn". Arch Daily, 27 August 2017. https://www.archdaily.com/61288/ad-classics-salk-institute-louis-kahn

[17] Paul, 173.

The apprenticeship model is one that has served humanity well for a long time, and yet so often in schools we seem to undermine what centuries of practice ought to have proved.

Paul breaks apprenticeship down into four pedagogies in a mostly linear sequence: *1. modeling, 2. scaffolding, 3. fading the teacher role, 4. coaching*. I was pleased to see this model laid out so clearly, because it's the one I have found my own teaching moving toward over the years, especially as that teaching has become less about conveying information and more about helping students do particular tasks. It's a model that will be familiar to anybody who has explored project-based learning, a type of pedagogy that fits quite well with a lot of Paul's ideas about how brains work.

A focus on imitation and apprenticeship requires instructors to be good models. It's one of the great challenges of teaching: putting yourself in the place of someone learning, remembering for yourself what it felt like to be new to this. It's one reason why some of the best teachers are not people who are themselves masters, but rather people who have struggled with the material to be learned. This leads us to what Paul says about thinking with peers. Interpersonal interaction is itself motivating, and one of the best things we can do to teach something is to move students into the teaching role. (Some studies Paul cites show that the other students don't even necessarily need to exist: if we have a sense of an audience and can imagine teaching them, that imagined teaching itself has benefits for learning.) The student-as-teacher model can be particularly powerful when used in a cyclical way, which Paul calls "cascading mentorship", where the participants are sometimes students, sometimes teachers. This ties in with her ideas about the "loopiness" of the human brain. We think more recursively than we do linearly.

These social elements of learning are often marginalized, seen as expendable or even frivolous, when in fact they are core to how brains work. One of our biggest problems, Paul says, is

that we assume information is information, regardless of context or environment. The brain disagrees. *How* we encounter information is extremely important to what we will be able to do with it. As Paul notes, this is a challenge for educational technology — too much technology reduces the social aspects of learning and thinking instead of strengthening them. This section of the book felt a bit under-developed, and the examples of "good" ed tech that Paul cited didn't convince me, but the brief discussion got me thinking about some of the tech-focused communities I've known that have developed both good thinking and good sociality. (Open source and open education groups come to mind immediately, partly because they are committed to a social view of knowledge.) I'm not sure that these are so much about a single piece of technology, though. Instead, they are about using technology to build knowledge and community, which is a somewhat different thing. If the tools themselves are not the focus, then community may be able to develop. Focusing on tools alone is not going to do much good for our brains, as far as I can tell.

Social learning does not mean learning without tension or argument. In the chapter "Thinking with Peers", Paul shows that argument and conflict are useful ways to focus attention and strengthen ideas, so long as the arguing is done with a certain amount of openness to new ideas. She approvingly quotes Stanford Business School professor Robert Sutton's formula for productive conflict: "People should fight as if they are right, and listen as if they are wrong." The brain, it seems, likes conflict. Or, at least, conflict helps strengthen attention. One thing teachers can do to help students develop interest in a field, for instance, is to tell stories of the conflicts within that field. Present history as a series of undisputed facts and your class is likely to fall asleep pretty quickly; present some of the conflicts over what constitutes meaningful history and your class is likely to feel much more involved. Get them arguing for their positions, researching and sifting the evidence, presenting

their interpretations, and soon enough you'll have some more historians in your midst.

Finally, Paul explores how groups learn. Though conflict can be a useful pedagogical tool, cooperation is necessary for groups to think well together, and too often we privilege individual action over mutual aid, when we have brains that are finely tuned machines for collaborative work (even if we don't always use them that way). "Uncritical group thinking can lead to foolish and even disastrous decisions," Paul writes. "But the limitations of excessive 'cognitive individualism' are becoming increasingly clear as well. Individual cognition is simply not sufficient to meet the challenges of a world in which information is so abundant, expertise is so specialized, and issues are so complex."[18] Numerous psychological studies have shown the extraordinary ability of our brains and bodies to benefit from synchrony, both physical (coordinated action) and mental (coordinated thinking). From mirroring each other's behaviors to mirror neurons, brains like to work together. And yet so much of the push in education is toward individualized work — I myself am director of an individualized major program (though we emphasize collaboration). "Aided by technology, we are creating individual, asynchronous, atomized experiences for students and employees — from personalized 'playlists' of academic lessons to go-at-your-own-pace online training modules. Then we wonder why our groups don't cohere, why group work is often frustrating and disappointing, and why thinking with groups doesn't extend our intelligence."[19]

One of the best things I picked up in project-based learning training was to be deliberate in teaching groups how to work together. Though our brains may be pretty good at it, our soci-

[18] Paul, 215.
[19] Paul, 215.

eties are not, and it's only getting worse. Students need modeling and practice to be able to figure out how to interact in positive ways in groups, how to structure collaborative work, how to overcome the atomizing forces of society. The pandemic has only made this more important while also making it more difficult. Too often, the pandemic has forced us to work alone, to train alone, to learn alone. There is strong evidence that this is not a path to productivity. Consider the "silo effect" that research on training shows. People, Paul says, "who need to think together should *train* together — in person, at the same time. Research shows that teams that trained as a group collaborate more effectively, commit fewer errors, and perform at a higher level than teams made up of people who were trained separately."[20] Additionally, people need to having feelings together and to engage in rituals together. These experiences create social glue and encourage collaboration. Hence the value of spaces like cafeterias, where people of various types eat together, engage in small talk, and learn from each other.

Offload and Loop

To use your brain well, get out of your brain. Paul calls this *offloading*. To think well, she says, "we should *offload* information, externalize it, move it out of our heads and into the world" (243). The simplest form is just putting things down on paper, whether via doodles or lists or long narratives. This reminds me of something commonly said among Composition & Rhetoric folks (whose field, like project-based learning, already incorporates a lot of the ideas in *The Extended Mind*): Writing is thinking. As someone supposedly once said, "How do I know what I think till I see what I say?"[21]

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[20] Paul, 224-225.

[21] Verifying the origin of this quote seems to be impossible. See https://quoteinvestigator.com/2019/12/11/know-say/.

Offloading can be far more complex, however, and doesn't necessarily involve language. For example, "when we use our hands to move objects around, we offload the task of visualizing new configurations onto the world itself, where those configurations take tangible shape before our eyes."[22] This leads to one of the basic principles Paul offers in her conclusion: "whenever possible, we should make information into an artifact, to make data into something *real* — and then proceed to interact with it."[23] This brings us back to the brain's bias toward physicality and concreteness. The more we can move abstractions toward some sort of concrete representation, the better we'll be able to think with them and about them. I would bet that most people who are excellent abstract thinkers have developed processes of their own to do just this. Certainly, as Paul shows, people capable of great feats of memory do so. Effective mnemonic devices (like memory palaces) match remembered information to concrete ideas like objects or places. (They also use the brain's capacity for spatial thinking, a topic Paul has some fascinating insights into.)

Paul likes to quote the philosopher who first came up with the idea of the extended mind, Andy Clark, when he says that humans are "intrinsically loopy creatures". Brains are not computers working in linear processes. "Something about our biological intelligence benefits from being rotated in and out of internal and external modes of cognition, from being passed among brain, body, and world."[24] (247). The path to good thinking and learning is not a straight one, but rather something that winds and loops around, that needs to move from us to the world and then back again.

Paul's presentation of the research also at least implies a loop between stability and instability. Or perhaps not a loop so much as a symbiotic relationship. Again, this should be

[22] Paul, 243-244.
[23] Paul, 244.
[24] Paul, 247.

common sense, but in lots of schools and workplaces it seems like a revelation. Creative, innovative thinkers need a sense of safety from which to do their thinking; the most lasting and effective change (in a creative sense) happens via people with a sense of stable identity and belonging. Frantic managers yelling, "Stop resisting change!" may be well intentioned, but their words and actions are counterproductive. Smart leaders will not focus so much on exhorting people not to be afraid of change and will instead work to do everything they can to increase a sense of stable, supportive community. Unfortunately, many leaders see stability, community, and a sense of belonging as enemies of innovation — when in reality they are the prerequisites.

How to Use These Ideas

The Extended Mind was a thrilling book for me to read because it undermined some of my own assumptions about how the brain works and, more importantly, how to work with the brain. Some of what it says is personally challenging, because, as I noted above, I would rather that my brain were less embodied. But I can't deny both the mounds of research showing that how I want things is not actually how they are, as well as my own experience of more than four decades of working with this weird brain organ thing in my skull.

What is most thrilling to me about the book, though, is some of what it got me thinking about in terms of its ideas' application in my own world, the world of teaching and learning. Every reader will come away with different practical applications from the many research studies Paul describes, but here are the ideas most on my own (extended) mind right now:

We need nature. Natural light and natural surroundings reduce stress and aid thinking. This might seem like common sense, but a lot of architecture ignores it.

Valorize motion, not sitting still. Because there is a longstanding cultural prejudice that sees sitting still as a sign of thinking and attention, we build structures toward this prejudice and we enforce it in much of our behavior. Yet low-intensity motion helps with thinking, and high-intensity motion is an excellent way to prepare for thinking or rejuvenate when the thinking feels stale. Perhaps a small step we can take as teachers is to reflect on how we have internalized and perpetuated this prejudice, then work to undo it. Begin by sharing this information with students. How might we incorporate more movement into our sedentary classes?

Encourage imitation. By seeing imitation as intellectually empty and even fraudulent, we neglect one of the most powerful learning tools we have. How might we build imitation more deliberately into our pedagogy? How might we use an intentionally-designed apprenticeship model for more types of learning?

Physical beats virtual. The brain's preference for the physical over the virtual does not mean online learning or technologized learning is inevitably bad, or even inevitably worse than physical learning. But we should design our virtual work for brains that prefer the physical. One of the less developed ideas in *The Extended Mind* concerns the things we prioritize in tech development. Too often, Paul says, we think speed is the height of achievement. Instead, we need technology that builds off of our innate, human capacities. I don't have any sort of answer for what this might look like, but it has me thinking about how I design the tech elements of my classes. This could be a fruitful area for instructional designers, for instance, to research and explore.

Build pathways between communal and private work. Too often, we celebrate one or the other, but thinking actually works best when it has the opportunity to be done both in private *and* alongside other people. Proximity and ease of movement between the two modes matters. If a person can

work on ideas alone and privately for a little while, then easily bring those ideas to a group, then move back to the private space, and continue this cycle as necessary, the thinking will be better.

Synchronicity trumps asynchronicity. Again and again in *The Extended Mind*, research shows that people who figure out how to work together at the same time end up learning more and better. This has become clear to me during the pandemic when we switched suddenly to emergency remote learning. What seemed to determine the greatest success and failure for my classes was *not* whether they were in person or online, hybrid or not. Instead, the biggest difference was between students who attended class sessions (via whatever modality) at the same time and those who worked asynchronously. The synchronous students had an easier time and did better work than the students who did the same work but did so on their own schedule. This is something I am going to bring to my discussions of attendance with students. Schools work well not just because organizing classes of students together is easier than organizing a bunch of individual students, but because our brains (if they are neurotypical, at least) like to learn together. This doesn't mean that all asynchronous learning is bad, but rather that to make it effective, we will need to attend carefully to the other ways we know that people learn well, because those other ways become more important when you remove as useful a brain tool as synchronous learning.

To think abstractly, get concrete. Embodied brains love the physical world and will privilege it over everything else whenever possible. To think well abstractly, we can do a few things to help our brains — physicalizing and offloading are two of the easiest and most effective. Find ways to make abstract concepts physical and preferably manipulable. Get them out of the brain itself.

Tell stories. While the material about just how darn embodied our brains are might have been something of a bummer for someone as uncomfortable being bodied as I am, the material about how much our brains like narratives was just what I wanted to read. I'm a fiction writer and a scholar of literature, so *this* was very much speaking my language. (Even as I am quite skeptical of some applications of neurobiology to literature.) Paul's presentation on pages 206-210 about storytelling and the ways it helps brains understanding information fits closely with my own experience of teaching. For better or worse, our brains seem activated by conflict. The more we can use (productive) conflict and storytelling in our teaching, the better we will engage students' attention and activate their learning.

Bigger is better. One of the more surprising bits of information to me in *The Extended Mind* is the convincing research showing that large, high-resolution monitors make thinking a lot easier than smaller and lower-resolution monitors — to the extent that "high-resolution displays increase by more than tenfold the average speed at which basic visualization tasks are completed."[25] Large displays, it turns out, allow the brain to use more of the body, including peripheral vision: "Research by [Robert] Ball and others shows that the capacity to access information through our peripheral vision enable us to gather more knowledge and insight at one time, providing us with a richer sense of context."[26] Larger displays also allow us to bring more spatial memory to bear on problems: "large displays, or multiple displays, offer enough space to lay out all the data in an arrangement that persists over time, allowing us to leverage our spatial memory as we navigate through information."[27] In various research studies, participants using multiple monitors have shown significantly

[25] Paul, 148.
[26] Paul, 148.
[27] Paul, 149.

better ability to remember information than participants using single monitors. Smaller screens are not just less efficient for thinking, they work against it: "The screen's small size means that the map we construct of our conceptual terrain has to be held inside our head rather than fully laid out on the screen itself. We must devote some portion of our limited cognitive bandwidth to maintaining that map in mind; what's more, the mental version of our map may not stay true to the data, becoming inaccurate or distorted over time." These ideas apply not only to technology, but to how we present information generally. Plenty of people, for instance, use large posters (or giant Post-It notes) spread around a learning space, often doing so because it seems like fun or an engaging way to change things up in a classroom (and it is!). In truth, though, such methods of presenting information are a great aid to memory and learning.

Prepare for stress. The ideal for learning and resilience is not to eliminate stress, but to anticipate it. The greatest achievers, whether high-performance athletes or people who work productively in stressful environments, are people whose brains and bodies know stress is coming and make way for it. We teachers can help our students with this. Let them know when the most difficult work is coming. Help them prepare for that work, then admit that the challenge is real and it is difficult. There might even be a way to meld this idea with the idea Paul is less fond of, that of growth mindset — certainly, the brain is not a muscle, but maybe one of the ways we can integrate what we know of the physiological response to stress with what we know of the brain's love of loops is to think of the stress of learning as itself a loop, and consider how we might position ourselves to experience the parts of the loop that are most stressful. This could be a valuable area for future research.

—September 2021

The Trick of Teaching: Magic and the Classroom

Since the title of one of my books is *The Last Vanishing Man* (and the title story includes historically-accurate descriptions of stage illusions), it shouldn't be a surprise that I love everything having to do with magic — the lore, the history, the illusions, the beliefs in some sort of "real" magic (what does "real" mean?), all of it. I've never been a very good performer of magic, though I've practiced various effects since I was a junior in college when, for ridiculous reasons having to do with keeping a big donor to the school happy, my roommates and I were asked to found a magic club at our university, even though none of us knew the first thing about magic. (We were environmental activists. I think the school saw it as a way not only to appease the major donor but also to keep us from embarrassing the school on CNN, as we had recently done. But that's another story!) With the university's resources at our disposal, we we able to learn from quite a few significant magicians in New York. It was fun, wild, and weird.

I lack both the guile and the manual dexterity to perform magic well, but I've studied many books on magic in all its forms, and I'm fascinated by recent research on magic, psychology, and neuroscience — see, for instance, the work of Gustav Kuhn. If I could have been anybody in history for a week or two, I would like to have been Ricky Jay, who knew all sorts of things I would love to know. I'm quietly obsessed with

what magic can tell us about storytelling.[1] In fact, since I see a sabbatical somewhere in my future, I'm toying with the idea of writing a whole book about storytelling and magic.

But all of this is getting ahead of myself and more than this little blog post can bear.

Earlier this week, in a conversation with colleagues after The Amazing Martha (Burtis) gave a 15-minute presentation on transparency in teaching, we got to talking about the teacher's bag of tricks.[2] The Great Robin (DeRosa) said that as a young teacher she relied on some tricks to get students engaged, to bring them toward particular revelations, etc., but as she delved deeper into the philosophy and science of learning, she began to feel that this was unfair, that tricks are a kind of power move, that they may be useful for conveying certain bits of content but they aren't really good for deep learning. Except maybe they are, sometimes, in some ways? She wasn't sure, and we came to no conclusions about this. Robin brought up a point I had made in a keynote presentation that she, I, and one of our librarian colleagues gave at the beginning of the summer to a bunch of academic librarians in New Hampshire.

What I talked about then was the value of making visible the invisible labor we often take for granted. Working in a library building, but not a librarian myself, I discovered that librarians do all sorts of things even I, a lifelong power-user of libraries, was unaware of. In fact, the librarians worked hard to keep a lot of their labor invisible, since it didn't seem relevant to what patrons needed. The problem was, it then made it easy to undervalue the librarians' labor. On the one hand, this increases exploitation. But on the other hand, I

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[1] See Jeff VanderMeer's interview with me at *Literary Hub* for some exploration of these ideas: https://lithub.com/matthew-cheney-on-literary-misdirection-and-hiding-truth-in-fiction/

[2] For Martha's presentation, see the handout and video at https://colab.plymouthcreate.net/resource/15in15-fall-2023/teaching-transparently/

found a lot of what the librarians did quite interesting. It increased my appreciation for their skills and knowledge.

As an analogy, I shared the story of what Penn & Teller do with one of the oldest magic tricks in the world, the cups and balls. For decades now, they have performed the cups and balls first in a traditional manner, the only innovation being that they use red plastic cups and tinfoil balls. It's amusing, because the trick performed by skilled magicians is always amusing, but it's not much more than that — it's still just, you know, the cups and balls. Audiences clap politely.

So then they do it again, this time with *clear* plastic cups, revealing the entire technique. (Generally, revealing techniques is a crime that will get you shunned and ruined in the magic community, but revealing the cups and balls at this point is like telling people [spoiler alert!] that Oedipus killed his father and married his mother.)

Penn & Teller made the cups and balls interesting for an audience again — and they did so by stopping it from being a trick. What they realized is that the technique performed with extraordinary skill is in fact more captivating than the illusion the trick provides. You could learn the cups and balls in fifteen minutes. Children do! But it would take you countless hours, days, and years to become as good at performing it as Penn & Teller.

My message to librarians was that in a world where libraries have been turned into culture war battlegrounds, and where universities are looking for any place they can cut staff, it's politically vital to reveal the invisible labor of librarianship. But also: a lot of the skilled work librarians do is more interesting than they may think, and they shouldn't hide it all away. Librarians are wizards!

As Martha talked about transparent teaching, and we continued the conversation about magic and tricks and what is fair or unfair, I couldn't help but think about why the study and philosophy of magic so entrances me, and has for 25 years.

Magic is about invoking a sense of wonder. But it's also about other things — attention, memory, perception, the instability of reality. Some magicians like the sense of power over an unwitting audience, enjoy putting one over on people, love the tricksiness of the trick. Plenty of magicians have taken their techniques from con artists, after all. But many magicians actually bristle at the word *trick*. (*Effect* is often preferred.) Simply fooling an audience gets old fast. We're all easy to fool, not because we are fools, but because our brains and senses work in particular, sometimes predictable, ways. Without even necessarily knowing what they were doing, magicians have exploited these features of our neurobiology for centuries. Magicians, con artists, psychologists, and teachers all make their living from studying some of those predictable ways that humans perceive, think, and remember.

In a valuable little book for magicians, *Magic by the Numbers*, Joshua Jay reveals the results of some academic studies of both magic and people's feelings about it. A study Jay collaborated on polled people about what they like and dislike in magic performances. There were some interesting overlaps between their likes and dislikes. Audiences said that they like surprise, amazement, and trying to figure out the trick (novelty); they said they dislike repetition and cliché (lack of novelty). (There were unconnected likes and dislikes, too. For instance, probably nobody is surprised that most people don't like traditional, "cheesy" magicians dressed in a tux. For some reason, a lot of performers are attached to the most awful schmaltz, but audiences at most tolerate it.)

Various studies of the brain and memory have shown that surprise is actually a key to memorability and to learning.[3] Under the right conditions, novelty is highly pleasurable to most people, and more importantly it is memorable. We remember what is different, strange, new — what inspires curiosity.[4] Gustav Kuhn points out in various presentations, articles, and his book *Experiencing the Impossible: The Science of Magic* that human infants are drawn to things they don't understand. We are a curious species.

One of the important points that both neuroscience and the science of learning and teaching have shown is that curiosity diminishes when fear or anxiety grows beyond a certain point, so what we're talking about is curiosity and novelty within an environment with a relatively low amount of anxiety and fear.[5] (Not a zero amount. This is important! Motivation generally requires a certain modicum of anxiety. I am anxious to get this blog post written in the next hour or, at most, two because I need to get ready to meet up with friends later. That is a useful, productive anxiety. It is very different from somebody saying, "Write this blog post or you will lose your job." That would be motivating, for sure, but the anxiety would overwhelm my ability to think and write well.)

A good magic show provides a safe environment for uncertainty. Magic creates cognitive dissonance: we see something we know to be impossible, and yet we have seen it. Our brains

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[3] See, for instance, Antony, James W., Jacob Van Dam, Jarett R. Massey, Alexander J. Barnett, and Kelly A. Bennion. "Long-Term, Multi-Event Surprise Correlates with Enhanced Autobiographical Memory." *Nature Human Behaviour* 7, no. 12 (2023): 2152–68. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-023-01631-8.

[4] Shin, Dajung Diane, and Sung-il Kim. "Homo Curious: Curious or Interested?" *Educational Psychology Review* 31, no. 4 (2019): 853–74. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-019-09497-x.

[5] Peters, Ruth A. "Effects of Anxiety, Curiosity, and Perceived Instructor Threat on Student Verbal Behavior in the College Classroom." *Journal of Educational Psychology* (US) 70, no. 3 (1978): 388–95. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.70.3.388.

struggle to reconcile such impossible reality. The cognitive dissonance is pleasurable instead of terrifying because we know that we are in a safe environment. We are open to both wonder and exploration because we do not interpret the impossible reality as an immediate threat. It is unsettling, but it is contained within a larger context of comfort. Kuhn sometimes connects this to horror movies: part of the pleasure of a horror story is that you know you're in a relatively safe spot in which to have these otherwise unpleasant feelings aroused.

Magic is easier to like than horror, I think, because magic is about curiosity and wonder rather than more negative emotions. (I write horror stories, so I say this with nothing against horror.) Magic and horror both rely on — and play with — belief. Magic explores and challenges what we believe to be possible and sets that against what we perceive to be happening in reality. Horror, which often overlaps with magic, has a somewhat more specific relationship to belief.[6]

What does all this mean for teaching?

First, teaching too requires an understanding of belief. It is where epistemology and metaphysics converge. But belief is also psychologically important for the learner. We learn better when we believe ourselves capable of learning.

Another key lesson from magic for teaching is the importance of curiosity. *Intellectual curiosity* is a term I cherish — perhaps for purely selfish reasons, because it is the only thing that explains the weird pathways of my life. (I am easily interested in lots of things.) I think the teacher's sacred duty is not to convey information but to inspire curiosity. Magic reminds us that that can be pleasurable. Remember: the features people say they like about magic performances are surprise, amazement, and, for about a fifth of a general audience, the joy of trying to figure out how it was done. (The *general audience*

[6] See my essay "The Horror of Belief", *The Mumpsimus*, 29 November 2022: https://mumpsimus.blogspot.com/2022/11/the-horror-of-belief.html. A revised version appears in my book *Asterisks* (punctum books, 2026).

part is important. I remember a magician saying somewhere that this desire to figure things out increased to basically 100% when they performed for engineers at Google.) Surprise, amazement, and joyful curiosity are feelings we can provide for our students that will not only increase their pleasure in learning but actually increase their learning.

Let your teaching be surprising. Find ways to bring amazement to your content and materials. (Remember what brought amazement to you when you were learning what you are now teaching.) Create situations where students have something to work on figuring out.

Another useful insight for teachers from Joshua Jay's studies concerns card tricks, and it's a bit paradoxical. First, Jay (a highly skilled card magician himself) discover that audiences find card tricks to be some of the least memorable. Do a card trick for an audience and then ask them to summarize the trick and they will often struggle, particularly if the trick has a complex plot, as many card tricks tend to, because magicians love the challenge of complexity … which is a problem for audiences of anybody other than fellow magicians. Card tricks ask viewers to remember numbers and images, and by adding a long sequence of moves to that, they reduce how much an audience is able to remember of something they only see once.

Before we get to the somewhat paradoxical part, here's another insight Jay shares (this one from some of Kuhn's studies as well as others): the most effective techniques to force the spectator to choose a specific card without realizing they are doing so are the ones that are slowest, simplest, and seemingly fairest. Magicians love complicated forces requiring immense dexterity. Of course they do — that's what demonstrates skill and art! Do a complicated force for a fellow magician and they will tip their tophat in respect. I'm not going to reveal what the most effective card force is, but I will say that if you polled magicians unfamiliar with the studies Jay cites,

they would almost certainly rank the actually most effective one to be least likely to succeed. Plenty of magicians would never even dare perform it because it's so simple that it seems the audience would almost certainly see through it immediately. That is not, however, what testing shows. Despite the force being so simple as to be able to be performed by a five-year-old, and so blatantly obvious that you would expect even a five-year-old would notice it, it consistently fools audiences.

These two things go together: audiences struggle to remember complex card tricks and they are tricked by, and consider fairest, a force that is so simple most magicians wouldn't even dare use it.

The lesson? Complexity is tough on our brains. Keep it simple! Just like magicians, we teachers can learn from Thoreau: "Our life is frittered away by detail … Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!"

However — here's the paradox: The memorability of a card trick plot does not necessarily affect the pleasure an audience takes (or doesn't) in a card trick. Context matters.

Let's illustrate this and finish up by returning to Penn & Teller. Their popular TV show *Penn & Teller: Fool Us* has introduced all sorts of great magicians from around the world to viewers at home. There have been some legendary

performances on the show.[7] But the moment that I love with all my heart is that of Dani DaOrtiz.

Spanish magic often has a chaotic element to it, perhaps largely due to the influence of Juan Tamariz, often said to be the greatest sleight-of-hand magician alive. Tamariz is, by all accounts, generous with his knowledge. Dani DaOrtiz was his student.

Even a great magician wouldn't likely catch everything DaOrtiz does in his *Fool Us* routine without reviewing it a few times. Because he does so much! This was part of his strategy. He knew he had a certain amount of time and instead of focusing that time on a single elegant trick, he chose a firehose approach. A lot of what he did was improv, just throwing tricks out and seeing what stuck. But he tailors it to his audience and situation. He had performed versions of what he calls The Ritual tons of times, and I think he even provided some videos to magicians about how it's done long before he went on *Fool Us*. But The Ritual as performed for *those* spectators at *that* show was unique. DaOrtiz is a gobsmackingly talented magician on a technical level, but even more so he is a master

[7] Shin Lim's legendary performances, particularly his first, demonstrate exactly what I'm saying here, for instance. The video of his first performance doesn't have 75 million views on YouTube because it's the most astonishing magic ever created. Lim was at the beginning of a now pretty spectacular career, he was still developing as a magician, and he was using materials easily available to anybody with access to a craft store. That video has 75 million views because Shin Lim presented his routine in such a beautiful way — as Penn says at the end, lots of people use smoke effects, and they're usually annoying. I expect Penn & Teller were less fooled than they said; they may not have been able to guess the exact techniques with only one guess, since there are at least a few different ways of achieving those effects, but they certainly knew what was going on. Nonetheless, and more importantly, they were astonished and moved.

of controlling his audience's wonder and surprise. He sees how they are responding and tailors his act to it.[8]

I've watched that *Fool Us* video a bunch and know some of what DaOrtiz is up to and nonetheless I would still have trouble summarizing his routine even now. What dominates my memory is the rapid patter, the endless chaos, and the miracle of finding a card in the chaos. The chaos, in fact, increases the pleasure, because the journey of the whole routine is from chaos to order. It's not even especially innovative order — as he says, he's just doing the classic ACAAN (any card at any number), an effect magicians have been creating techniques for since at least the 1940s. (Some of those techniques are ingenious but rely on tricks of mathematics that make the performance less than thrilling, I find. If you have to cut the deck and deal cards again and again, it begins to feel less like magic and more like mechanics, which is what it is. But a satisfying performance doesn't feel mechanical. DaOrtiz knows this, and that's why his techniques, chaotic as they may seem, are superior to a lot of the traditional ones.)

Absent simplicity, what Dani DaOrtiz gives us is the relief of order from chaos. This is valuable for teachers, too, because that's also part of our job. Not simplification — if anything, we should be showing students that the universe is wider and more complex than any of us usually think. (Cosmologists know this well.) But complexity can bring pleasure and also insight. The chosen card does, somehow, appear at the end.

Do we have any order from the chaos here? Can I leave you with anything except a scattered pack of cards?

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[8] For some insight into all of this without giving away what DaOrtiz is doing, watch magician Chris Ramsay's reaction video on YouTube titled "The Greatest Fool Us Act in History?!". It's really insightful about what is going on, why it works, and why it is truly special.
https://youtu.be/tQj3gUvvHHY?si=DFIGU8xEz3MCkbs-

How's this: Teachers don't need to throw out their bag of tricks. But they need to think like a magician and ask themselves, always, what the tricks for. We should not be opening our bag to be tricksy, but rather to evoke surprise, to introduce novelty, to encourage curiosity. When the best magicians fool us, their deception comes from an honest place, a place of mutual participation in illusion and wonder. We probably don't want to be presenting too many illusions to our students, but we do want to provoke wonder, and we do want to make the classroom a place of mutual participation.

Like Dani DaOrtiz, we can say to our students, "Welcome to my world!" And we can mean it. *Welcome*. Welcome to magic, to wonder, to learning.

—September 2023

The Value in the Public Good

The coronavirus pandemic has revealed many fissures and failures in U.S. society, some of which have long been obvious, but better times kept them more easily ignored. For instance, the pandemic has revealed just how much the U.S. power structure stands opposed to the concept of the public good. There are some services that support the public good, or which are generally perceived as doing so — public libraries, fire departments, police departments, public schools, etc. — but many of these are always scrambling for funding, while others are based on the only model of public good that the U.S. has consistently supported: the military.

Stanford educational sociologist David Labaree has pointed out that there was a time when the U.S. considered higher education a public good.[1] This was during the Cold War, when the U.S. government poured funding into schools to help them develop new weapons to kill Communists with. This was also a time when the CIA funded all sorts of cultural programs, working from the (now quaint) assumption that supporting cultural institutions would help us against our enemies and

[1] "An Affair to Remember: America's Brief Fling with the University as a Public Good." David Labaree on Schooling, History, and Writing, October 8, 2020. https://davidlabaree.com/2020/10/08/an-affair-to-remember-americas-brief-fling-with-the-university-as-a-public-good/.

make us respected around the world.[2] There were intersections here, too, with higher ed — as Eric Bennett has shown in *Workshops of Empire*, much of the infrastructure of American creative writing programs benefitted from CIA support.[3] It may seem strange that tools of U.S. imperialism were central to the development of higher education as we know it, but it was new only in details and inflections. Much of American higher education is quite literally founded on imperialism. Land-grant universities continue to profit from land they stole from Native Americans.[4]

(But I digress.)

As Labaree's research demonstrates well, the behavior of politicians, funding agencies, and administrators suggests that the U.S. has not considered higher education to be a public good at least since the early 1990s, and the period when it did consider higher education to be a public good (in a limited, militaristic way) was a brief interruption in a longer history of seeing higher education as a private privilege. This despite the fact that universities have a tremendous effect on their regions and beyond, as Christopher Newfield has documented at length in *The Great Mistake*. Again and again, governments and administrations treat public universities as if they are of narrow and limited value, while simultaneously benefitting

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[2] The key text on this history is *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* by Frances Stonor Saunders (The New Press, 2000). See also *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing during the Cold War* by Eric Bennett (U. of Iowa Press, 2015), *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature* by William J. Maxwell (Princeton, 2016), and *The Aesthetic Cold War: Decolonization and Global Literature* by Peter J. Kalliney (Princeton, 2022).

[3] My own thoughts on all this are available in a blog post at *The Mumpsimus* in 2016 that looks closely at Bennett's book: https://mumpsimus.blogspot.com/2016/03/workshops-of-empire-by-eric-bennett.html

[4] See the important reports on the history of American land-grant universities at *High Country News* in the spring of 2020: https://www.hcn.org/issues/52-4/indigenous-affairs-education-land-grab-universities/

from the many and various social, economic, and cultural values they provide.

Meanwhile, the pandemic has made clear just how deep the neoliberalism goes. Many an administrator has learned the beauty of the phrase "never let a serious crisis go to waste", and even people who once sprinkled their dissertations with Marxist citations now stand atop ivy-covered towers and swear allegiance to the gods of market logic. It's as if legislators, trustees, and administrators all read Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* and thought it was a pretty good instruction manual.[5]

The result is an utter impoverishment of imagination and possibility, one that has left us especially vulnerable in this time of multiple, massive crises. School after school had been cut to the bone *before* the pandemic, and now bones are being ripped from skeletons. It's hard to keep up with the announcements of staff and faculty being cut, of programs ended, entire schools shut down. Just across my social media feeds recently: 900 layoffs and 6,400 furloughs at Rutgers, 200-300 (or more) potential layoffs at Marquette, Ohio Wesleyan cuts 18 majors — and so on. There is no reason to believe it will get better. Decades of austerity emptied any reserve of resilience that might have protected us now.

When schools are facing tens of millions of dollars in losses, it's hard to blame administrators for falling back on the neoliberal ideas, even when we know it's those very ideas that got us here — our administrators must answer, after all, to various constituencies for whom the gospel of finance is holy writ. It is dispiriting, though, to see so little resistance from leaders. To see so little advocacy for the public good and so little acknowledgement that the financialization of everything has rotted our cores.

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[5] See *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* by Philip Mirowski (Verso Books, 2013) and *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* by Naomi Klein (Henry Holt, 2007).

Morale disappears in this environment. Despair mingles with frustration which mingles with anger which mingles with desperation which mingles with rage. Fear alternates with sadness. Toxicity floods the campus. Instead of vision, what we get from boards of trustees and administrations is a habitual repetition of empty phrases like *market realities*, which they hold aloft as shields while they slash and burn whatever is nearby in frenzied desperation to placate the latest metric spewed forth by a roiling sea of bizschool schemes.

We are told that all this trauma is the result of our own failure to bow to *the market's* commands. We have not delivered what our customers want. It is our fault for not being better, more attractive, more appealing, more innovative, more entrepreneurial, more up-to-the-minute, more flex. If only we had more zip in our steps, more zing in our Zoom! Then we might be as valuable as a technocrat!

Markets are fickle masters. Woe unto you who smash decades of work, life, knowledge, and infrastructure in a vain quest for the latest and greatest thing — a thing which will slip away with the next quarter's earnings statement. Universities may be beasts slow to change, but there is value in that when what is hip, new, and desirable lasts only as long as the latest meme.

The actions now taken by university administrations are ones that a cynical person might suspect are taken with glee, because they accelerate the scorched earth strategies begun some time ago: hollowing out of the humanities, hastening the destruction of tenure, marginalizing faculty governance only to areas not considered central to the functioning of the school, promoting the role and power of financial officers within the university hierarchy, etc. The playbook was written long ago. Now it's set to warp.

While it is infuriating to see all the carnage — *it did not have to be like this* — the salt in the wound is the failure of leadership to believe in the institution as a public good rather than a customer service. Giving up on the public good is what

left us open to evisceration in crisis. Leaders' belief in the public good was so flimsy, their hostility to it so open, that it isn't surprising now when nobody in power even pretends to believe in anything other than the whims of the marketplace. Still, the absolute failure of courage is nauseating. Will no leader in university administration risk their six-figure salary to say, "Our institution is not a business, it is a unique service to the public, one the public benefits from in myriad ways. I will not be complicit in the destruction of that public good."

No, they won't say that. Because they can't, for various reasons new and old. The immediate crisis makes ideals feel like luxuries. The massive obstacles we face are nothing if not overwhelming. Budgets have to get balanced, bills have to get paid. But most of all, leaders won't say this because they don't have the words. The complete triumph of the neoliberal attitude has rendered the language of public goods foreign to the lips of power.

What, I want to ask the powers that be, are your values?

If your vision begins and ends with a balanced budget … what's the point? Go work at a widget factory. Do you have values other than money, other than "efficiency", other than a rapacious idea of "innovation" that looks a lot like reheated techbro social darwinism?

Values matter most in a crisis. Who you are when things are going well doesn't tell us much; who you are when things get bad is how you should be judged. Values allow us to assess how much we have compromised, how complicit we have become. Without values, it's too easy to inch your way toward cruelty, selfishness, ego. This is especially true for anyone in a position of power. Power is the greatest seducer, the greatest deluder. Power will continue to make you think you are a good person long after you have become a monster. If you have no values by which to judge your monstrosity, you are lost, and will leave nothing but a swathe of destruction and misery as your legacy.

The public university is, as Christopher Newfield has repeatedly shown, incontrovertibly a public good (albeit one that has been beaten and plundered). But more than the concrete reality, the *concept* of the public good is necessary to us now, because that concept provides vision and values. The more we do to erode the vision and betray the values, the more we slip into the realm of the monstrous.

I have no answer to the present budget crisis at my university or any other. I am glad I am not an administrator, which, aside from salary, is a no-win job even in good times. The pain and destruction we currently face may be unavoidable, its sources many and its roots deep. But if leaders cannot articulate a vision — whether, as I would prefer, of the public university as a public good or, as they might prefer, of something else — then their actions will be fickle and incoherent, suffused with inadvertent cruelty, causing greater chaos as they play Whack-a-Mole with people's lives and careers. You will see it in the language. They will resort to cold bureaucratism, prioritizing policies over people, privileging data sets over wisdom, composing form letters from death sentences. The same vague phrases will be used in answer to different questions; spreadsheets will supplant arguments; rationalizations will be thin as snakeskin; responsibility will be deferred to abstractions or obscured in passive constructions.

What can we do? How might we reshape our feelings of powerlessness into a sense of possibility? How might some ideals survive?

I have no answers.

But I do have questions.

What, we must ask the Powers That Be, *do you value?*

Imagine yourself decades from now, in a ruined world. A young person approaches you and asks, "What did you do when everything fell apart and the public universities were destroyed?"

Will you answer: *I fought as hard as I knew how for the ideal of the public good, and I stood in solidarity with people doing the same. We couldn't save much, but we tried to help each other.*

Or will you stand in the ruins and say: *I added to the destruction.*

—October 2020

Afterword (2026)

"There is no reason to believe it will get better," I wrote, and I was right, but I did not realize how much worse it could get. Let this be a reminder to us all that when it comes to education, neoliberalism, and ideas of the public good in the United States, things can always get worse than we might like to imagine.

Salvage

A post for the Finite Eyes blog, April 2021, after more than four months of no posting:

1.

The toll of the pandemic year on my teaching, work, and life is evident in silence. I last wrote here in November, shortly before my school began an extended winter break. Though I had time to write here, and I had ideas about things to write, it was difficult to summon the energy to do so. I began writing a post of reflections on teaching in the soon-to-be-past term, the first term where we'd had time to plan for the remote and hybrid learning situation that the pandemic forced upon us. I wrote in that post about cognitive overload, and as I wrote about it I found myself unable to continue to write, because just writing about cognitive overload exacerbated cognitive overload. I tried to write about lessons I wanted to bring forward, to salvage from this term and this experience. But then I realized I didn't want to salvage any of it. I didn't want to learn from it. The pandemic was not a teachable moment. It should not be turned into our latest whizzbang edtech bro-toy.

I didn't want to learn from this experience. I didn't want to reflect on it, find the good spots, grow from the struggle. I just wanted to survive.

Barring catastrophe, it looks like the upcoming fall term will be more or less normal for us. I've gotten vaccinated.

Getting the initial shot was the first moment I had felt anything like relief in a long time, a sense of possibility. With luck I will be able to travel a little bit this summer, not far, no, but farther than I have been for the last year, when I have barely gone farther than the distance from my house to campus, about seven miles.

I do not want to learn from this experience. I just want to be done with it.

2.

(I wrote the above a week ago. I had a plan for where the post was going, but I forget now what it was.)

3.

I want to write about the ways the pandemic provided a crisis that academic neoliberals have found too good to waste, the way the pandemic's imperative to change the ways we do things was turned into an excuse to cut faculty, end programs administrators had long wanted to end, and consolidate power among the administrative class at the expense of shared governance, faculty autonomy, general morale, and basic decency. I want to write about this, but writing about it right now is just too dispiriting. It is hard to write about the house burning down when you're still choking on smoke.

4.

On Twitter, I keep complaining about academic publishing. This is not only because academic publishing is horrible (a lot of it is), but more, I suppose, because it's a

narrow topic and a clear example of terrible practices. The ways people allow themselves to be exploited because they think it will be good for their careers, their prestige, their CV, their tenure — it's just astounding. I'm not separate from it. (I published a book with Bloomsbury Academic, fer gawd's sake!) But because I also have experience with other types of publishing, I have never expected anything from academic publishing except a line on my CV that I can use for tenure. Every essay I've published with journals that took my copyright and publishing rights (for no remuneration except the "prestige" of publishing with them) did so with my full knowledge and complicity, because I needed those publications for my job search. I knew the devil's bargain I was making. But this doesn't mean academic publishing is a good system, and I continue to be surprised by people who have gotten beyond the point of needing to have one of these little gold stars on their CV who nonetheless comply with the bad practices of so many academic publishers. (Not all! I was pleasantly surprised to get a publishing agreement with the MLA recently that's quite reasonable and actually seems to take the rights and labor of writers seriously. They should, in fact, publicize the reasonableness of their publishing agreements. Indeed, if you are an academic publisher reading this and thinking, "But we're not bad like that!" then you should shout that to the rooftops. The big and terrible publishers get away with their big terribleness partly because too many people think that's just the way it is and must be.)

This issue bothers me more for the way it shows that tenured faculty have failed the profession than for the ways it demonstrates anything else. When it comes to publishing, academia is the way it is because academics with power have agreed to it. And in this pandemic, that is one of the things that has become so clear and so galling — things are the way the are because people who could have stood up and put their prestige and careers in the way of the juggernaut did not.

The only conclusion I can come to is that a lot of prestigious academics and administrators want things to be the way they are.

5. & 6.

(deleted: ranting at clouds)

7.

One of the reasons I haven't written here for a while is that whatever I tried to write ended up becoming, within a few sentences, a scream against the universe. Whenever I start to write about academia, all I can do is yell out, "Why have you let things get like this, whoever you are — you with more power than me?!?"

And I'm one of the lucky ones! I won the academic lottery, got a job on the tenure track. It's a job at a regional state school in the state with the least funding per student for higher education out of all the states. My ever-more-stressful job in the land of austerity is an example of *WINNING* in academia!

8.

My students are still doing interesting, creative work, despite all the impediments, despite all the awfulness. That's what has always made working in schools worth it, if it was worth it: students thinking in new and interesting ways, students taking control of their lives, students finding paths forward.

9.

I can't talk about pedagogy or teaching with people who work at wealthy private schools anymore. I nod and listen politely, but no. Sorry. There is no common language. I have a degree from one of these places, an Ivy. I worked for ten years at private high schools (including the school Jared Bleeping Kushner graduated from). They warp your entire idea of what is possible for other people, the majority of people, and I think they warp your ethics, too.

The schools I worked at for ten years would see it as a terrible failure for their students to go to the school I teach at now. As a career trajectory, I consider this a triumph.

10.

A few months before the pandemic forced us into lockdown, I began writing an article I hoped might eventually become a book on cruelty-free teaching. My work on cruelty-free syllabi has been popular, and I haven't had a chance to really develop the concepts in ways I would like. I had gotten a few thousand words of rough draft started when the pandemic hit. I haven't looked back at the manuscript since. I do hope to get back to it this summer — I'm leading a workshop on the ideas for the Boston Rhetoric and Writing Network, which is good motivation to keep going with the material. There's a real enthusiasm for it out there, and I've been especially pleased to see my own ideas alongside or inspiring others, such as my friend Benjamin Hagen's valuable essay "No Children, Only Tasks: Reflections on Cruel Pedagogies".[1]

[1] "No Children, Only Tasks: Reflections on Cruel Pedagogies" by Benjamin Hagen, *Modernism/Modernity Print Plus*, Johns Hopkins University Press, February 9, 2021. https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/hagen-no-children-only-tasks.

This failure to write the work that people most clearly and actually want me to write has been a source of frustration and disappointment for me, but the ways the ideas have spread out and been gathered and developed by other people has been a great inspiration and balm. *This* is what academic research ought to be — somebody comes up with concepts and ideas, other people take off with them, building their own concepts and ideas, it all becomes a conversation and a collaboration. That's the ideal. it's why I'm such an advocate of open access work, because it allows all sorts of audiences to participate, and it relieves the burden of any one person to be the be-all and end-all of ideas. In some ways, the sciences are better at this sort of collaboration than the humanities are, even though the humanists are the folks who speak most loudly about the values of community.

A friend and colleague recently recommended to a bunch of us at my school the book *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. I got a copy, thinking it might have a few useful concepts, but Disability Studies is not really my field, and it's one I'm wary of just dipping a toe in for fear of misrepresenting important ideas and conversations. I read the book in one day. Devoured it. It was one of those books that makes you realize you have needed it for a long time without actually knowing you needed it. I will write later about why, but I do want to note it here and to say that ideas of disability and justice are ones we all need to pay closer attention to at all times, but especially now, because so many of us are, whether we know it or not, injured and in need of care networks.

My failure to write more about cruelty and pedagogy was not because I lacked ideas or inspiration or time, but because I just didn't have the brainspace to think about cruelty during a moment where so much happening in the world, higher education, and especially my own institution felt like one cruelty after another.

11.

I didn't write a lot of anything during the spring and summer of 2020, but eventually I inched my way toward expression again, and I returned to the form I have most often returned to, but had been frozen with for over a year: short fiction. (I once published a book of the stuff.)[2] For the first time in quite a while, I was reading and writing short fiction more than anything else. The writing was slow, unprolific work, but the results pleased me — a feeling I hadn't had in, literally, *years* about much of anything I had written.

Then Barry Lopez died. Lopez was the leader for a workshop I attended at the Bread Loaf Writers Conference in the summer of 2000, a workshop that changed my life because it focused not on technique but on purpose. Lopez assumed we all had enough technique to write well, and what he offered us were conversations about why we wanted to write. This was exactly what I needed at the time. Only days before his death, I had rediscovered my Bread Loaf notebooks with the exercises he gave us in them. After his death, I began writing an essay about him, thinking I would send it to a place like *Lit Hub* or *Orion*, somewhere that might be interested in a short memoir of Lopez as teacher. Luckily, no publication was interested in this — I say luckily, because once I started writing, I had trouble stopping. The piece is now 18,000 words and still growing. It is not just about Lopez, but about a lot of other things as well. It has been pure pleasure to write, even as it offered tremendous challenges of form and scope.[3]

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[2] *Blood: Stories* (Black Lawrence Press, 2016). Some of the stories I wrote in 2020/2021 would find their way into my second collection, *The Last Vanishing Man and Other Stories* (Third Man Books, 2023).

[3] This work, revised and expanded, was eventually published in 2023 as an Open Access book by punctum books as *About That Life: Barry Lopez and the Art of Community*. See https://matthewcheney.net/books/about-that-life-barry-lopez-and-the-art-of-community/

One of the reasons I found writing about Lopez (and topics he inspired) so powerful at this time was his life's thoughtful, serious approach to questions of meaning, interconnectedness, resistance, regeneration, and responsibility. I could not write about cruelties while living in a cruel time, but I could not stop writing about the sort of questions that invigorated Lopez's work. When I do return (soon, I hope) to questions of cruelty and pedagogy, they will be more deeply informed by the ideas my writing on Lopez brought to me — ideas of connection informed by ecology, ideas of how and why we give attention, ideas of tenderness amidst the inevitable violence of life. Perhaps this, really, is what I have needed to wait for.

12.

Students in my senior seminar course are turning in their term projects this week. A few of them have struggled: their ideas kept changing, or they procrastinated, or they encountered insurmountable obstacles, or their project became much bigger than they thought it would. I have given these students permission to let their project be incomplete or even incoherent. The point of the course is not to have a finished, final, polished product. That's great when it happens, but the point of the course is learning, and process is more important to learning than final product. I tell these students to stop their project wherever it's at and write about why it is what it is and what they would like it to be if they had more time. Students who have failed to come up with much of anything, I tell to make their failures their project. Nothing worked out. Why is that? Write about it. Create a presentation about it. What have you learned, about yourself, about education, about the world?

"What can you salvage from this?" I asked one student. "How can you celebrate the salvage?"

13.

It's hard to look on any of my teaching this term as something I'm proud of. We've just been getting by. The courses do what they need to do, but not more than that. Recognizing that my students are struggling in this pandemic world — in some ways more than they were a year ago, when this was a new adventure — I stripped the classes down to their bare minimum of work. Even though I know that was the right decision and many students are still having some trouble keeping up, I have a lifetime of indoctrination into the expectations of teaching that still makes me feel guilty for not being the grand pontificator leading students toward hard-won enlightenment through back-and-brain-breaking work. The protestant work ethic and the ethic of sadism inherent in so much of what we do is a fierce poison to clear out of the system.

The point, I keep telling myself, is learning and growth. Have my students learned and grown this term, even (especially) the ones who have struggled? Mostly, yes, I think so, the ones who stayed engaged with the work. The ones who pretty much checked out and disappeared … not at all, but at a certain point, well, you've got to take the small victories and let the things outside your control wash away. Especially in the midst of a global pandemic.

14.

Looking at my students' projects this term, I keep thinking how wonderful they are, both the students and the work: creative, thoughtful, imbued with passion, quirky. Messy, sure; incomplete and aspirational, definitely — but also clear evidence of learning. By design, I didn't "teach" these students anything. But I did try to create a space in which they could explore and try things out and bring it all together (whatever it was) in the

end. Can we even call that *teaching*? More like: creating space and time for learning, then getting out of the way. I can live with that.

15.

What can you salvage?
How can you celebrate the salvage?

—*April 2021*

Afterword (2026)

I have edited this text less than any other chapter in this book, not even changing punctuation, adding only a few footnotes. It seems important to preserve the feelings and expressions of the COVID crisis years as faithfully as possible. How I expressed myself in April 2021 was deeply affected by the pandemic in ways I was (and am) conscious of and, I'm sure, ways that I was and still am unconscious of. We are still living in the ruins of 2020/2021.

Thinking Hope Under Erasure

~~Hope~~

Long ago, when the Earth was young, I enrolled in a poetry workshop led by my friend Liz Ahl, and one of the assignments was to write a "how-to poem" — that is, a poem instructing readers on how to do something. I wrote a poem called "How to Have Qualms", and though I have no desire to return to the poem itself, I am fond of the title, because if there is one thing I know how to do, it is how to have qualms.

Today, my qualms are about the idea of hope, particularly as it relates to education. Things are bad in the institutions of higher education in the U.S., especially among the supposedly public schools, schools which for many years now have seen their funding cut, their missions perverted, their students burdened with debt, their staffing slashed, their faculty adjunctified. In such an environment, it's understandable that people would ask where to find hope.

I wonder, though, if hope is the wrong thing to look for. Certainly, even if hope is necessary, it's likely in short supply right now. So what else might we seek?

I've rarely in my life ever succumbed to a feeling I would call *hope*. Yes, fleeting, here and there, a bit of hope, sure. Like happiness, which is also fleeting and short-lived, a pleasant enough thing as it flashes by, but it only lives in flashes. (Contentment, rather than happiness, is my goal.) This could as much be a matter of personality as anything else. My view of

life and the world has been, for as long as I remember, founded on pessimism.

Even in elementary school I was drawn to horror stories, because horror stories fit with my understanding of life as a condition of anxiety, terror, and suffering. In high school, I discovered Existentialism and, even more importantly, Theatre of the Absurd — and I finally felt that I was among my people. While I was philosophically interested in Camus, I was temperamentally drawn much more to Beckett, because the meaningless and suffering of existence deserves laughter. (A dark, even morbid, laughter, but laughter nonetheless.) Beckett's devotion to Laurel & Hardy and, especially, Buster Keaton linked with my own young adulation of the Marx Brothers, particularly their most absurdist films (*Duck Soup* being the apotheosis of this, though Horsefeathers is most applicable to academia). I have never thought the emptiness of existence and the meaninglessness of the universe require tears more than they welcome laughter.

Laughter at absurdity is one thing; hope quite another. When it comes to hope, I'm more on the side of the dour Dr. Schopenhauer:

> As a reliable compass for orientating yourself in life nothing is more useful than to accustom yourself to regarding this world as a place of atonement, a sort of penal colony. When you have done this, you will order your expectations of life according to the nature of things and no longer regard the calamities, sufferings, torments, and miseries of life as something irregular and not to be expected, but will instead find them entirely in order, well knowing that each of us is here being punished for existence and each in our own particular way.[1]

[1] Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Essays and Aphorisms*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. Penguin Classics. Penguin Books, 2004, 49.

Though the above is hardly something you should express if you want to be the life of a party, nonetheless it does not need to be the cause of depression and cruelty, as Schopenhauer notes:

> The conviction that the world, and therefore humans too, is something which really ought not to exist is in fact calculated to instill in us indulgence toward one another: for what can be expected of beings placed in such a situation as we are? From this point of view one might indeed consider that the appropriate form of address between person and person ought to be, not *monsieur, sir,* but *fellow sufferer, compagnon de misères*. However strange this may sound it corresponds to the nature of the case, makes us see other people in a true light and reminds us of what are the most necessary of all things: tolerance, patience, forbearance, and charity, which each of us needs and which each of us therefore owes.[2]

Or, as another great philosopher, Tom Waits, once sang: "Misery's the river of the world — everybody row!"

Hope? Nope!

A friend of mine is a writer whose work often touches on themes of the environment, and in the last couple years interviewers have commonly asked him if he has hope, how he has hope, what gives him hope, etc. A reasonable question, given the likelihood that the future is going to be even more awful than the present. He has taken to redirecting the question, however. *Hope*, he says, is not really relevant. Have hope, don't have hope, the situation is what it is. That doesn't mean we should abandon activism, toss our hands in the air, and give up on mitigating the disasters all around us. That

[2] Schopenhauer, 50. (Translation slightly adjusted.)

would be stupid. Reducing suffering is a good thing, because even though suffering prevails (that is the condition of life), suffering can be lessened. Less suffering, even in the midst of lots of suffering, is still *less suffering*. While it's still possible to avoid a 2°C rise in global temperatures, in many practical ways it seems unlikely, which is unfortunate … but even so, we could still try to avoid a 3° rise or a 4° rise or a 5° rise, because 3 is significantly better than 4, and 4 is better than 5. (Though get much beyond 5 and human life is rather hard to sustain at all.) This isn't about hope, it's about minimizing suffering as much as possible under the circumstances.

We've all had an immediate experience of this situation during the pandemic. The US, for instance, might not have been able to prevent the first 50-100,000 deaths in our country. But we sure as hell could have prevented 500,000 deaths. That we didn't does not mean we should give up trying to prevent more deaths. As I write this, we're approaching 600,000 dead in this country. We can avoid hitting 1 million this year, and we should. That has nothing to do with hope and everything to do with trying to limit or reduce suffering.

Similarly, higher education is a slashed-and-burned field of chaos. As an institution, particularly a public institution, if it hasn't become a world of hurt already, it will soon. My own school is suffering program eliminations, workload adjustments, and massive staffing shortages and instability after the Board of Trustees offered a lucrative deal to anyone willing to retire early or just leave. Quite rationally, a lot of people took them up on the offer, so by my rough calculations we're losing 20-30% of tenured faculty and who knows how many non-tenure-track faculty and staff. Most are not being replaced. And this isn't because the university was bloated with workers before. The work isn't going away, it's just being piled onto a smaller and smaller workforce. We had already suffered significant losses of employees, particularly staff, over the last decade. In office after office, jobs that previously were done by

three or four people are now done by one, if they are done at all. You don't need to be a visionary to be able to imagine what this has done to morale. Meanwhile, the entire state government is controlled by the party that hates the idea of the public good and doesn't much like the idea of public education. Most of the other viable sources of funding beyond the state are some branch of Disaster Capitalism, Inc. Happy days!

Abolish the University?

Do you want more pessimism? Or not exactly pessimism, but a sort of nihilism about the possibility of higher education ever being worthwhile while trapped in capitalism. Friends, I give you FT, who argues that if you pretend toward an anti-capitalist ethic, it makes most sense to abolish the university as an institution:

> It is not possible to abolish capitalism without abolishing the university as we know it. The university as we know it cannot survive the end of capitalism and therefore the continued existence of the university is antithetical to the horizon of any anti-capitalist imaginary…[3]

To admit that the university can't exist without capitalism is to admit that without capitalism you wouldn't have this job or this career or this office and really…who would you be? This is a form of what Gramsci calls "institutional fetishism." It's a common component of hegemonic ideology: the worker learns to think of the workplace as an institution separate from their labor, and comes to believe that they are permitted to labor by the grace of the institution, when in fact the institution only exists by virtue of the worker's labor. The tenure system works as an academic lottery: a lot of smart people do a lot of work

[3] When I wrote this essay, the quoted passage was, if I remember correctly, openly available online. It is now only available to subscribers of FT's Patreon at https://www.patreon.com/posts/50191072

for free or dirt cheap in the hopes of one day striking it rich. It's a rot, but hegemony is a hell of a drug.

Some parts of this argument seem to me right on target (especially for wealthy research universities), but I have qualms. FT allows their bitterness at academia and academics to muddy insights. Institutional fetishism is very real in academia, and definitely leads to tremendous amounts of disempowerment as workers align themselves with an idea of the institution rather than an idea of the workers' labor, or even of basic self-respect. But we can dispense with institutional fetishism, and maybe even capitalism, and still have teachers and students, as well as a lot of the ideals of the university, an institution that pre-dates capitalism and even in these hypercapitalist times has held onto some of the elements of a feudal guild structure (for better or, often, worse).

Who I would be without capitalism is … a more content person. Probably still a teacher, because it's what I know how to do. Heck, I don't even need all of capitalism to go away; I'd be thrilled just to have a good social safetynet and universal health insurance so I didn't feel so tied to having to work at this one job and could instead experiment more with life. (So maybe FT is right and I *wouldn't* still be a teacher without capitalism. But it's easier for me to imagine the end of capitalism than it is to imagine myself not teaching. I just wish I didn't feel so obligated to this specific job because I don't have another good way to get health insurance. Employers, of course, benefit from our sense of there being few alternatives, because that allows them to shape the workplace into what they want it to be, since there is less chance that we will leave if we don't like what they do.)

If I had hope, it would be hope for the end of capitalism and the end of institutions as we know them. I would *love* to abolish the university as it currently exists, even though I've got the highly-coveted job of being a tenure-track professor. I would love to abolish tenure itself — it's a necessary evil at the

moment to preserve some bits of power against the predations of management, but it's inequitable (by design), it fuels hierarchy, and it is too often used to set workers against each other rather than to unite them. I would happily give up tenure if it would turn the university into a workers' cooperative. Right now, though, giving up tenure would mean giving administrations and legislatures more power, even at institutions with good unions. (If there is anything like hope for the short term, it resides in unions, especially if tenured faculty participate thoughtfully and generously in those unions.)

But we live in capitalism and I have bills to pay and the only thing I'm marginally employable for is teaching, so here I am. Hello, *compagnons de misères*!

Power/Empowerment

Though I do not have hope, I do not have despair, either. (Or, at least, I don't have more despair than usual. Life is SNAFU: Situational Normal, All F'ed Up. Keep pushing your rock, Sisyphus.)

The analytical concept I always find myself returning to is *power*. (A friend once called me an inveterate Foucauldian, but before I'd read anybody of such theoretical complexity, I had fallen under the spell of the anarchism of Peter Kropotkin, Emma Goldman, Paul Goodman, and Ursula Le Guin.) Indeed, I think rather than popular ideas of hope, empathy, etc. we might be better off framing things through questions of power and, as I said above, suffering.

For instance, consider empowerment. What would it actually mean to seek empowerment, and what would it mean to empower?

If I say that my goal is to empower students (a good and reasonable goal) then what practices will lead to that? How will I know that students are empowered? Considering that much teaching is based on the disempowerment of students, how

might I reconfigure my teaching to empower, and what might that mean for my role? How does my desire to empower my students connect to the interaction of the institution and the students — and how should that inform my teaching?

Stuart Hall said of Antonio Gramsci's understanding of power: "every form of power not only excludes but produces something".[4] In our quest to empower, what do we seek to exclude and to produce? What does the power within our own teacherly role exclude and produce? What does institutional power exclude and produce?

Further, how does our relationship to power produce or relieve suffering?

Compassion and Generosity

One reason why I resist the idea of hope is that the way it gets used in these sorts of contexts feels a bit too teleological for my tastes, even utopian. Things, I tend to believe, don't get better; rather, suffering shifts its location. This is perhaps why I find Taoism and Buddhism far more interesting as religions than Christianity. This doesn't mean I just want to mope around, though. I am inspired by a chapter in Pankaj Mishra's *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World* titled "A Spiritual Politics" — and I say that as someone who immediately resists the word *spiritual* about anything — in which Mishra argues that a kind of decentralized idea of politics developed in the early Buddhist teachings:

> (Buddha's) model for the internal structure of the *sangha* [Buddhist community] was the small republic in which communal deliberation and face-to-face negotiation were possible. … He saw consensus as of the utmost importance to the life of the *sangha*. …

[4] "Gramsci and Us" by Stuart Hall, in *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*. 1988. Verso, 2021, 165. The chapter is available online at https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/2448-stuart-hall-gramsci-and-us

> Controversy, whenever it arose, could be settled by the method of the dissenting individuals removing themselves and forming a new group. … The Buddha's early effort to accommodate dissent, and acknowledge the plurality of human discourse and practice, later saved Buddhism from the sectarian wars that characterize the history of Christianity and Islam; and the Buddha's emphasis on practice rather than theory kept his teachings relatively free of the taint of dogma and fundamentalism.[5]

This was also an idea of politics (and religion) that emphasized the necessity of practicing generosity and compassion — and built in opportunities for that practice. Monks would go out each day to beg, opening an opportunity for laypeople to practice generosity and compassion. The presence of beggars gave passersby a concrete way to enter into a generous and charitable frame of mind while also, via their charity, taking care of the immediate needs of the monks — a win-win, really, because the donor gets to strengthen the habit of charity while the monk gets to eat. By begging, the monk performs a service to the larger community while also providing for the self.

Mishra writes:

> For the Buddha as much as for Plato, life in society was the inescapable obligation faced by human beings. There was no private salvation waiting for them. In fact, as the Buddha defined it, liberation for a human being consists of entering a non-egotistical state, where he felt the conditional and the interdependent nature of all beings.[6]

[5] Mishra, Pankaj. *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004, 284-285.
[6] Mishra, *An End to Suffering*, 288.

This did not, however, lead early Buddhists to advocate for a state that foisted its obligations off on charity. Instead, according to Mishra, early Buddhist teachings about government and society proposed a strong welfare state. Rulers were advised to allow immigration and to encourage neighborliness, establish hostels, support doctors, care for the sick and injured, lower taxes, save profits for times of trouble and scarcity, subsidize farmers, provide capital for investment to merchants, and pay government workers fairly. A ruler's authority came not from heredity, social position, or strength, but from rightness of action. Rulers who did not act on compassion, generosity, and an understanding of interdependence did not have legitimate authority.

I am not a scholar of Buddhism, and so I do not know if Mishra's interpretation of its early history is correct, but I also don't care. The vision Mishra presents is a valuable one for thinking about how compassion may be a structurally useful force for shaping power and dealing with the inevitability of suffering. It is also useful for thinking about authority.

Authority and Empowerment

Our schools are institutions of hierarchy, and hierarchy maintains itself through force and exclusion, through power, through cruelty. Hierarchical institutions give some people power and authority, other people less, and thus the hierarchy preserves what those with authority most want to preserve — which, more often than not, is first and foremost their own power. Power corrupts because it is seductive and addictive.

To avoid the seductions, addictions, and corruptions of power, power must flow freely and generously, not be held onto or hoarded. We should analyze power so that we can figure out how power can be dispersed and diffused.

The question I have for anyone in authority is: *How much of your power can you give away? What limits the amount of power you can give away?*

Giving power away is empowerment. Hoarding power is egotism. Here I turn to my favorite of Le Guin's anarchist texts, her adaptation of the *Tao Te Ching*. Here, the first few lines of chapter 38, which she titles "Talking About Power":

> Great power, not clinging to power,
> has true power.
> Lesser power, clinging to power,
> lacks true power.

Early in my teaching career, I clung to power. This was because I was young, inexperienced, insecure. Good mentors helped me see that the best teachers work hard to make themselves unnecessary. This is also terrifying. It continues to be terrifying — just this term, after a couple decades teaching, I was overcome with a feeling that I wasn't *doing enough* in my classes. (Despite all the evidence that my students were learning just fine without my constant nagging and intervening.) This feeling flourished, almost to paranoid levels in me, because we are living in difficult times, both in the world and in my particular institution, and insecurity makes us (or, at least, me!) cling to power. But as any good Buddhist will tell you, you must cling to nothing. (And only to nothing!)

Empowerment requires an analysis of power so that that power may be subjected to generosity. This is necessary as a model, too. We should not empower others only so that they may themselves egotistically cling to that power. Instead, we must empower people so that they are able then to empower others. This is how we bear the suffering that is existence. So much of that suffering is the result of people clinging to power.

Destroy the Ring

Perhaps an analogy is appropriate here. (A literary one, but also kind of nerdy. If you're not feeling nerdy, you might want to skip this section!)

I appreciate Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* because it seems to me a beautiful, terrifying, and deeply true allegory of power. Power is attractive, addictive, and destructive. It should not be centralized. There should not be one ring of power — it is too much even for wizards to resist. Only the most humble can bear it for long without becoming monstrous, and even they will be hollowed out by it. The one ring must be destroyed, its power dispersed.

What we must ask of authority is not, "Are you Sauron?" Most authority is not pure evil. Rather, we must ask: "Are you Isildur, who, having cut the ring of power from the finger of Sauron, preserves it? Or, perhaps you are Boromir, who thinks the power of the ring can be harnessed for your own idea of good?"

The one ring must always be destroyed. The quest to do so will leave many scars, but its necessity is clear and absolute.

New Conjunctures

If there is hope, that hope lies in the dispersal of power, the generous giving away of power — empowerment. I do not think of it as hope, though; I think of it as the necessary task.

I am writing this post in quiet response to a recent presentation by Joshua Eyler, "On Grief & Loss: Building a Post-Pandemic Future for Higher Ed without Losing Sight of Our Students and Ourselves".[7] This was a profound

[7] Information about this event, and a YouTube recording of it, can be found at https://colab.plymouthcreate.net/resource/joshua-eyler-keynote-on-grief-loss-building-a-post-pandemic-future-for-higher-ed-without-losing-sight-of-our-students-and-ourselves/

presentation that zeroed in on essential problems and questions in a way that feels both affirming and inspiring. It is also a call to analyze, wield, and disperse power.

Though the ruling ring of power must be destroyed, it may sometimes be necessary to use it to keep it on the path leading to the fires of Orodruin, where it will be destroyed. Now is the time when we as educators must band together in fellowship, and do whatever it takes to keep what we value from being destroyed. If that means wielding — even consolidating — power, so be it. Sometimes, an analysis of power shows that power cannot be dispersed until it is seized. We cannot empower students if we are ourselves disempowered.

We cannot return to whatever "normal" was before the pandemic, either in life generally or in our specific work. We must, as Josh Eyler says, refuse to let the conversation turn back to norms that were, in fact, bad to begin with. We must insist that the traumas of the last year and a half be acknowledged and worked through, that grief be recognized, and, on a more positive note, that new flexibilities and creativities be continued — and even strengthened.

This is not, though, Year One of a revolution. We are in the flow of existence, and while this may, in fact, be a meaningful and revolutionary moment of crisis, it is also the product of long history. That must be acknowledged. Some of the failures and miseries of this experience were unavoidable consequences of a global health crisis or unavoidable consequences of living in capitalism; but some of them were products of the attitudes and assumptions that structure our institutions.

And so I will end by quoting Stuart Hall, the final words of one of his last statements, a beautiful essay now published as "Through the Prism of an Intellectual Life" in volume 2 of Hall's *Essential Essays*:

> I commend to you the duty to defend [the academy] and the other sites of critical thought. I commend you to defend it as a space of critical intellectual

work, and that will always mean subverting the settled forms of knowledge, interrogating the disciplines in which you are trained, interrogating and questioning the paradigms in which you have to go on thinking. That is what I mean by borrowing Jacques Derrida's phrase "thinking under erasure." No new language or theory is going to drop from the skies. There is no prophet who is going to deliver the sacred books so that you can stop entirely thinking in the old way and start from year one. Remember that revolutionary dream? "Year One"? "From now on, socialist man"? This is when the new history begins! Today, the dawn of the realm of freedom! I am afraid the realm of freedom will look mostly like the old realm of servitude, with just a little opening here and there toward the horizon of freedom, justice, and equality. It will not be all that different from the past; nevertheless, something will have happened. Something will have moved. You will be in a new moment, a new conjuncture, and there will be new relations of forces there to work with. There will be a new conjuncture to understand. There will be work for critical intellectuals to do. I commend that vocation to you, if you can manage to find it. I do not claim to have honored that vocation fully in my life, but I say to you: that is kind of what I have been trying to do all this while.[8]

—May 2021

[8] Hall, Stuart. *Essential Essays, vol. 2: Identity and Diaspora*, ed. David Morley. Stuart Hall: Selected Writings. Duke University Press, 2019, 322.

Afterword (2026)

This essay was an important step in clarifying for me the two ideas that have been strongest in my political, social, and educational thinking over the last five years or so, ideas about suffering and power. Similar ideas are implied and sometimes apparent in my earlier work, but it is really from this essay forward that suffering and power became visible to me as central themes of my thinking. I am an unabashed Foucauldian, but it is always, as here, Foucault refracted through the work of Stuart Hall and certain tendencies in Asian religion and philosophy. As the catastrophe of the second election of Donald Trump to the U.S. Presidency has unfolded, Marxism has also become a more prominent tool of analysis for me; since young adulthood, I have been drawn to forms of anarcho-communism, but with the absolute triumph of billionaires over our world in recent years, I have been more and more likely simply to describe myself as a communist, since it is the only analytical framework that seems to me to combat the core structures empowering Trump, the tech billionaires, fossil fuel extraction, and the neoliberal looting of schools, libraries, and all other institutions of the public good. And there are enough people who think "communism" means the height of all evil that the term can be a fun way to shock the prudes.

Six

Poor. Queer. Studies.

Matt Brim's *Poor Queer Studies* is the most exciting book about academia that I have read since Cathy Davidson's *The New Education*, and for me personally it is even more exciting than Davidson's wonderful volume because *Poor Queer Studies* is about the world I have spent much of my life in, both socially and disciplinarily.

When I bought *Poor Queer Studies*, I didn't know much about it except the title and subtitle (*Confronting Elitism in the University*). I was surprised and pleased to discover a blurb from Cathy Davidson herself on the back cover, and then to discover that Brim teaches at the College of Staten Island, City University of New York (CSI CUNY) — the same school where a queer writer I deeply admire, Sarah Schulman, teaches, and also the school where Ira Shor teaches, as described in *When Students Have Power*.[1] Shor's descriptions of CSI have remained with me ever since I read his book, because the place he described there was one with even more significant financial and resource challenges than those at the (small, unselective, regional, public) university where I work. Brim shows that things haven't gotten much better financially for CSI since Shor published *When Students Have Power*, but like Shor he also makes the school sound like one where exciting teaching

[1] Sarah Schulman hasn't, to my knowledge, written at length specifically about teaching, but books such as *Conflict Is Not Abuse* and *The Fantasy and Necessity of Solidarity* are rich with provocations about how we learn from and exist with each other. The latter book, in fact, is dedicated to Matt Brim.

and learning continue to happen, despite myriad challenges and obstacles.

When I read this series of questions on page 3, I (alone in my house) nearly stood up and cheered:

> What does Queer Studies have to say about class sorting within the academy? What is the role of the field within the processes of stratification that can be said to divide the field from itself along the lines of class and institutional status? How might queer collaboration across peer and nonpeer institutions offer a model for the redistribution of intellectual and material resources, and how can that positively impact attendant racial disparities in higher education? How might Poor Queer Studies galvanize interclass, cross-institutional queer formations that do not rely on a unidirectional, aspirational model of progress? And most fundamentally, how can rethinking the work of Queer Studies in the context of students' relative material need and raced/gendered precarity, academics' professional liminality, and underclass institutional identity inform and potentially enrich the field, its pedagogies and theories, and the academy beyond it?

That is a rich set of questions; however, what made me want to cheer was not (only) the questions' richness, but the experience and knowledge that I could see motivating them: the experience and knowledge of someone who works at the kind of place that is not typically included in representations of "the academy" but which is where the majority of American students go to school.

I thought immediately to a conversation I had with a professor in grad school. As we were chatting about our own mixed experiences of rich schools and poor schools, she said she learned a lot in the moment in grad school where she

realized that the famous professor expounding on the glories of academic Marxism was wearing a $5,000 suit and expected his grad students to clean his house. I've had similar moments of enlightenment at every big academic conference I've ever attended.

Poor Queer Studies is simultaneously two books, one a critique of the field of Queer Studies itself, the other a broad critique of academic structures in the U.S., with Queer Studies as one example that is easily extrapolated to virtually every other academic discipline. A professor of Business who works at an under-resourced, unprestigious school will find plenty to nod their head in agreement with here, because even if you are Professor Capitalist von Neolib, if you work at Underfunded State U, your experience is significantly different from that of even the lowliest professor at Harvard.

There is too much in this book for me to describe it all here. There is an enlightening, powerful sentence on virtually every page, and many passages I read with the drive of reading a thriller. (Brim's prose is well paced, clear, and meaty, which makes the reading both fulfilling and compelling.) I could write 10,000 words on the ideas in any one chapter. I will not, though, because … well, I have grading to do, advisees to attend to, committees to wrangle, dinner to make, etc.

A quick outline of the book, though, will give a glimpse of its depths, and I will then say a few words about how Brim's insights created a deep sense of gratitude and solidarity in me, a sense of relief at feeling, for once, *seen*. It's in many ways the same sort of feeling I had when I first discovered Queer Studies itself.

The chapters, with brief comments on them:

- *1. The College of Staten Island: A Poor Queer Studies Case Study*: This chapter is what it says, but also much, much more than that. "Why," you might wonder, "should I read about the specifics of this

school?" There are a few reasons, both the qualities that make CSI different from other schools (lots of queer faculty, programs, and students) and the qualities that it shares with many others (working-class student body, long history of being cut to the bone by austerity measures). But there's also what Brim uses this case study for, and that's what's most important here. He asks, again and again, with great nuance and knowledge, what place Queer Studies has for students like his own in institutions like his own, and further what possibilities such students and places might offer not only to Queer Studies but to the world of academia (and the world) at large.

- *2. "You Can Write Your Way Out of Anywhere": The Upward Mobility Myth of Rich Queer Studies*: If I could ask you to read only one chapter of *Poor Queer Studies*, it would be this one, even though I pretty much love the chapters equally, for different reasons. But it is here where my own dissatisfactions with academia and, specifically, with my experience of disciplines such as Queer Studies is laid out with a clarity I have never seen before. The quotation in the title comes from a comment Brim heard at a conference on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, with the commenter saying that they found it powerful to hear Sedgwick say, "You can write your way out of anywhere." Brim writes that it's possible the quotation was imagined by the commenter or misremembered, but it's believable, and it's also believable that Sedgwick might not have known just how flat-out wrong it is, because she herself "seems, inarguably, brilliant enough to have written her way out of anywhere. She wrote her way from Cornell (undergraduate) to Yale (graduate school) back to

Cornell (post-doctoral) to Hamilton College (first tenure-track job) to Boston University (second tenure-track job) to Harvard (fellowship) to Amherst (third tenure-track job) to Duke (first tenured job), on her way to the CUNY Graduate Center (distinguished professor)…" Brim's perspective is nuanced, and recognizes both Sedgwick's brilliance and the many obstacles and hardships she faced, but the fact is that most people don't get to spend much — or any — of their lives in schools like Cornell, Yale, Amherst, and Duke. Hence, Rich Queer Studies.

- *3. The Queer Career: Vocational Queer Studies*: This chapter brings the insights of Labor Studies to bear on Queer Studies, and vice versa, suggesting many fruitful possibilities when we see universities as work sites — and not just work sites for the faculty and staff, but also for the students, who are workers both in the academic sense and in the very practical sense of having jobs outside of school so that they can pay for school and, later, pay off the loans that higher education so often burdens students with.

- *4. Poor Queer Studies Mothers*. This is in many ways the most brilliant and surprising chapter of the book. I began it thinking I would skim it, since I felt invested in the other issues the book raised but worried that a discussion of motherhood was somehow ancillary. After a few pages, I began to read it with at least as much excitement as the other chapters. The section titled "Spelling for Mothers" is a thrilling account of a class session in which a student brought her child — and the class rose to the occasion in marvelous ways. I fell in love with these students. And I wanted to fight for them, because by the end of

this chapter I was furious that academia so often sidelines, marginalizes, erases, and insults motherhood and the extraordinary moments for human solidarity that it offers. Further, this chapter offers one of the starkest differences between rich schools and poor schools, because the kind of pedagogy that came naturally to the classroom at CSI is very hard to imagine at a rich school. And that is one thing that is unequivocally a loss for the rich schools.

- *5.* Counternarratives: *A Black Queer Reader:* This chapter uses John Keene's extraordinary book *Counternarratives* as an example of how a literature course at a school like CSI can use challenging material to create meaningful learning opportunities. I was excited to read this chapter, because I think *Counternarratives* the most impressive short story collection by an American writer in the last 20 years, if not longer. Brim proposes that *Counternarratives* is a kind of primer, a "reader" that teaches us how we must read if we are to step away from the deformations and ignorance that white supremacy imposes on our culture. Further, the chapter shows how Brim has used the book for that purpose in his classes, turning its very real difficulties for even the best readers into tools for learning. The chapter ranges beyond Keene's extraordinary and essential book, though, to other conversations that intersect with the previous chapters herein. It ends with a strong critique of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's idea of "the undercommons", a concept that Brim finds attractive but also too tied to privileged ideas of academia: "I therefore question but do not abandon the undercommons," Brim writes. "Instead, I look for

models of being of and not of the university that rely less on claims to immaterial prophecy, less on the figure of the undoubtedly queer subversive intellectual, and less on a nonplace imagined from above. For me, that trifecta opens up too great a class- and status-based gap for Poor Black Queer Studies to fall through."

- *Epilogue: Queer Ferrying*. Many people who attend or work at CSI ride the Staten Island Ferry to get to campus, and Brim uses the idea of the ferry as a beautiful, even hopeful, coda to the book. He questions the popular progressive idea of free public education, an idea with plenty of merit, but which, on its own, would likely only exacerbate inequities between public and private institutions. He asks, from a Queer Studies perspective, why "do we not call out in one voice for our queer teaching and research to be done as part of an equal-access, open-access, public educational project that does not reproduce class and race stratification? … With all our talk of queer publics, why are Queer Studies professors, as a field-based collective, not refiguring ourselves as public servants charged with educating people regardless of income, class, or status? What would that discipline look like, and where?" (The call for this to be field-based is important. Brim's book, for instance, is not open-access, and it is published by Duke University Press. He addresses this elsewhere in the book, but he also provides the frankly ridiculous requirements for tenure and promotion at CSI, which suggests that this book can't both serve his career and serve the public good, because his career relies on publishing frequently with prestigious presses. A Queer Studies commitment to

> open access and the public good would not change CSI's tenure and promotion requirements, but it would shift what is considered a "prestigious" publication. Personally, I dream of an academic future where the prestige of a publication is not tied to the prestige of the university whose name is in the press's title, but on how many readers have access to and are discussing the work.) Finally, Brim posits CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ Studies at CUNY as an example of a Queer Studies ferry, an institution that actively and deliberately uses its resources to connect people from disparate places, people of very different backgrounds and experiences, in as equitable a way as it is able.

(There is an obvious extension of Brim's ideas that he doesn't mention, since it would turn his book into a very different one, but it is fertile ground for continuing scholarship: a postcolonial, global critique of Queer Studies with a similar attention to class and to the realities of higher education around the world. Rich Queer Studies is not just Rich American Queer Studies, and Poor Queer Studies ought to find solidarity and enrichment in an expansion beyond the borders of the USA. Many other hierarchies and assumptions can booby-trap such work, though, and so it must be grounded in the knowledge and insight of postcolonialism and associated disciplinary work.)

Finally, I want to return here to Chapter 2, both to offer some quotations from the book that particularly resonated with me, and to offer some bits of personal reflection on the ideas.

> One's institutional and personal power is easy to be unconscious of, all the more so in a time when education generally is under attack and neoliberal austerity politics have had repercussions across the

> academy. But problematically, these generalizations, while apt, rhetorically flatten different perspectives within the hierarchy. "It's rough all over." "We're all in the same boat." As indeed in some ways we are. I must admit, however, that I continue to feel shock and not a small bit of disbelief when professors in the humanities and social sciences at elite colleges and flagship campuses … talk to me earnestly about the lack of funding for their work. … It doesn't seem to me that we are all in that same boat, and indeed some of the loudest cries of scarcity come from dry land, that is, from the top of the academy.[2]

It's true that attacks on the humanities, on identity-based disciplines, on education in general have had terrible effects at even the wealthiest schools. But the effects are not evenly distributed. The fate of a professor with degrees from Ivy League schools and a position at a place where the endowment is bigger than many countries' GDPs is not the fate of a professor without such a privileged pedigree. The losses to students at wealthy schools are very different from the losses to students at underfunded schools, just as the fate of graduates of wealthy schools are very different from the fate of graduates of underfunded schools.

> Elite Queer Studies relationships often date back to undergraduate and graduate educations at exclusive colleges and universities. It's a small Rich Queer Studies world — like Facebook, in its early days, at Harvard.
>
> …
>
> When one's livelihood depends not only on one's own written words but on the words inscribed on that most cherished work-permit-by-another-name

[2] Brim, 79.

> — a letter of recommendation by a high-status advisor at a top school — then we need to ask just what kind of work relationship is getting reproduced, rewarded, and coded as knowledge within Rich Queer Studies. … The payoff of becoming permanently ensconced at the top of the system of class and race stratification of higher education is that magical ability to forget or ignore or dismiss or doubt the fact that Queer Studies is Rich Queer Studies. The payoff is that one doesn't have to talk about what one's ideas cost to make.[3]

Academia loves hierarchies. This is an uncomfortable truth for people whose disciplinary work requires them to question hierarchies even as their daily existence depends on them and perpetuates them. Tell Famous Queer Studies prof that they should try teaching at an unselective school, or even a school with open admissions policies, and watch them turn into a big fan of hierarchies and gate-keeping faster than you can say "hermeneutical imbrication".

When I was in grad school, a professor optimistically told me that the nascent ideas that ultimately led to my dissertation were of such a quality that I would certainly be attractive to a top-tier research university once I was on the job market. This was utter nonsense and fantasy, and he should have known it — I certainly did, even at the time. The school I got my PhD from was ranked as an R2 research university (though it has since gone to R1 in what I think is a futile and likely to be financially catastrophic quest for prestige). I was half of a cohort of two in my entrance year for the PhD in Literature, a program always on the verge of disappearing. I didn't know anybody who was especially famous academically. The chances of my being hired for a tenure-track position at a major research

[3] Brim, 84.

school were (are!) lower than my chances of becoming a billionaire. Ain't gonna happen. There are various reasons for that, but a big one is that schools rarely hire people with degrees from schools considered less prestigious than themselves.

Rich schools protect their status. I've seen it in action, because my own pedigree includes a master's degree from an Ivy League school, Dartmouth College. I once asked an administrator there why they charged such high tuition, since they could do okay without charging any tuition at all, and most students got huge discounts in the form of grants. She looked at me somewhat aghast. "Nobody wants to be the *cheap* Ivy," she said.

Look, too, at how rich schools keep getting gigantic donations from philanthropists. Dartmouth doesn't really *need* anybody to donate to it, but people love to send them millions of dollars rather than send millions of dollars to, say, my own little financially-struggling regional university. One *day* of donations to Dartmouth would make a big difference in the lives of the employees and students at my school. But there's no great prestige in donating to No-Name Regional U, whereas all your friends at the country club will clap you on the back for donating to Famous Rich U.

It's prestige and status all the way down.

> …my initial framing of Poor Queer Studies/Rich Queer Studies redeploys class terms that seem rigid or stale. My intent in using these overly familiar (yet ever-ambiguous) terms is to insistently locate Queer Studies within its milieu — the unflinchingly hierarchical, class-stratified, category-loving context of higher education. We teach in tiers. We write with resources. Yes, Queer Studies names a category-busting intellectual project, but at a material level it also names a job that is site specific. We have offices (shared or not?), we have classrooms (packed or

> not?), we have office equipment (printer paper or not?), we have restrooms (hot water or [as at CSI] not?), we assign books (affordable or not?), we write books (accessible or not?). These questions of materiality can raise questions about relating — or not — across class-overdetermined academic tiers. They can reveal the power of structural disparities in higher education to condition mixed-class encounters. Yet they are not questions Queer Studies organizes itself around. Why not?[4]

Queer Studies has long embraced the idea of examining our embodied realities, and yet has remained mostly silent on the material realities of its own people. Perhaps out of embarrassment, because, as Brim repeatedly suggests, a lot of the people who get to write and speak most prominently in the field have a pretty good physical-economic-labor reality, at least in comparison to most other people in the world. Queer Studies may be marginalized within academia, but if you're pulling a six-figure salary, have a nice research budget, only teach a few classes (probably to highly-selected grad students), get to travel the world giving speeches … well, you've got it good.

Worse, as Brim brings up in his discussion of Sedgwick and elsewhere, your class privilege in an institution with wealth and resources will render invisible the life of someone at an institution without wealth and resources. As I talk with friends and colleagues at richer schools than my own, I often hold back, because it's clear that they flat-out can't conceptualize what the reality of my day-to-day academic life is. (And my day-to-day academic life is relatively good, in the grand scheme of things!) It's not just that they can't imagine what resource shortages are, but that they can't imagine what my

[4] Brim, 90-91.

students are like, both in the challenges those students face and the challenges I face in trying to figure out how best to meet their needs. Similarly, I can't imagine a lot of what my friends and colleagues at rich schools experience, despite my experience as a student at such schools (Dartmouth, but also three years undergrad at NYU). Imagine, for instance, having enough professional development money to not have to cover a big portion of a conference's costs yourself! Imagine unlimited academic databases! Imagine being able to afford catering for events on campus! Imagine — well, it doesn't matter. Imagine winning the lottery!

I don't want to end this on a down note about the deprivations of life in world of Poor [Insert Name Here] Studies, because something else Matt Brim makes clear is important: The kind of knowledge that Poor Queer Studies discovers, shapes, creates, and shares is remarkable and valuable, and Rich Queer Studies is itself poorer for not recognizing it.

If you want innovative pedagogy, don't look to big rich schools where everybody's terrified that they might lose a little bit of status. Rich Queer Studies may be a place of conceptual innovation, a place where brilliant people have the time and resources to research abstruse concepts and publish esoteric monographs, and where they get to teach the most academically accomplished (and privileged) students on the planet, but practical innovations — the innovations of living — occur in the margins and among the marginal. That's a lesson I learned early on from Queer Studies itself.

—November 2020

Poor Queer Studies for a Society of Outsiders

At the 2022 MLA Convention, I was honored to be on a panel devoted to "Woolf's 21st Century Academia", a panel sponsored by the International Virginia Woolf Society.

My presentation, "Poor Queer Studies for a Society of Outsiders" positioned Woolf's Three Guineas *alongside Matt Brim's* Poor Queer Studies. *However, once I really got into it, I realized I had far more material than we had time for, and I ended up cutting what I had prepared in half (already having cut it way back from my original plan).*

I offer here the longer draft of my remarks.

> **"If it's inaccessible to the poor it's neither radical nor revolutionary."**
>
> —Statement on a banner in a photograph of an art show. Floating around on the internet with various attributions. Original source undetermined.

Matt Brim's recent book *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* begins with a quotation from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*: "One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well," and then summarizes the context, wherein Woolf compares the dull, basic meals served to the women at Fernham with the rich, fulfilling

meals served to male students at Oxbridge.[1] He then compares Woolf's passage to an experience of his own, the experience of teaching a dinner-time Queer Studies course at the College of Staten Island, part of the City University of New York system, an experience that included meals of potato chips and candy bars from vending machines, meals eaten by students hurrying to class from jobs and families, meals eaten while everyone moves from one classroom to another, looking for a projector that works so they can review and discuss the evening's text, the acclaimed Black queer film *Moonlight*. He then introduces the topic of his book:

> If Queer Studies has over the past thirty years successfully argued, elbowed, and snuck its way into the academy so that its courses can be found in both likely and unlikely places—not only at our Oxbridges and Fernhams but at our Bloomsbury Community Colleges—we might shift attention, à la Woolf, to the question of the resources with and without which queer students and professors teach and learn and write across academic work sites.[2]

Though starting from *A Room of One's Own*, *Poor Queer Studies* fits at least as well alongside Woolf's 1938 book *Three Guineas* and some of her other writings on education, even as Woolf's primary concern is pacifism and the gender inequalities in higher education in Britain, while Brim's book excavates the ways ostensibly progressive fields such as Queer Studies benefit from and replicate the flagrantly unequal power structure of U.S. higher education. During our time today, I will focus on how lines of thought in *Three Guineas* might inform the arguments, analyses, and proposals in *Poor Queer Studies*, offering us all some tentative paths forward at a moment when both education and society are in crisis.

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[1] Brim, *Poor Queer Studies*, 1-2.

[2] Brim, 3.

First, following Brim's lead and, to some extent, Woolf's, I must highlight my own situation and experience, because it is such experience — the experience of workers at a school that is not wealthy, not a flagship, not prestigious — that, though it is the experience of the majority of faculty, staff, and students in the United States, does not often get represented in the public imagination. I am an assistant professor at a regional state university in a state that has a long tradition of laissez-faire politics, which is to say, a state that does not, fundamentally, believe in public goods. In terms of per capita funding of higher education, New Hampshire is, in most reckonings, either at the bottom or among the bottom five states. In terms of tuition, ours are some of the most expensive public colleges and universities in the country, and our students graduate from our public schools with some of the highest debt. At my university, faculty and staff are the lowest paid in the University System, we are chronically under-staffed, our buildings suffer from continually deferred maintenance, and even our austerity-minded administrators morbidly laugh when they tell us, yet again, to do more with less. We aren't cut to the bone anymore; the bones are broken, crushed, and marrowless. And there are plenty of schools in tougher shape than my own.

In *Three Guineas*, Woolf herself uses the language of poor colleges vs. rich colleges — the poor colleges in her world were the colleges for women, the rich colleges were the institutions that educated men. In both Brim and Woolf's books, these schools are *made* poor by the ways their societies prioritize and structure educational hierarchies. It is hard not to believe that, consciously or unconsciously, people of power, wealth, and prestige desire the poverty of these schools — that, like the suffering child in Ursula Le Guin's story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas", the poverty of these schools in fact is a precondition for all the things people value and celebrate about rich schools.

The students who attend poor schools are not seen by society, or at least the educational power-brokers, as serious, worthy, or deserving of better. If they were, the system would be different. In 1930s Britain, the educational powers-that-be clearly believed that wealth would be wasted on women; in the present United States, governments, institutions, and wealthy donors clearly believe that the kinds of people who study and work at regional state schools, at community colleges, and even at big but woefully underfunded public schools simply don't need the resources of a Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, Stanford, Duke. If the powers that be thought that education ought to be open to everyone who desires it, and ought to be well resourced, then they would do unthinkable things like tax the endowments of these places that have essentially become hedge funds with universities attached; instead of giving more money to those hedge funds, they would donate their spare wealth to schools like mine; and, perhaps most unthinkable of all, they would insist that wealthy schools significantly increase the percentage of applicants they accept, and would work to shift our cultural consciousness away from venerating the "highly selective" — a program of eugenics more than of democracy — and would instead celebrate the institutions that teach the broadest, most diverse populations of students. If as a society we actually valued democratic education, then we would see the continued existence of the rich schools, in their current form at least, as a shameful indictment of our failures.

In *Three Guineas*, Woolf is primarily concerned with the question of how to end war. The dominant narrating voice of *Three Guineas* seeks to figure out how to donate her money — her three guineas — so as to bring peace. She discusses education in response to an appeal for money from an "honorary treasurer" who is "asking for money with which to rebuild a

women's college".[3] How might we, Woolf wonders, create schools that teach students to hate war? How might we disentangle educational institutions from war-making? Her initial impulse is to say: Burn it all down. Walk away from Omelas. It is absurd for women to ask for entrance into fundamentally patriarchal institutions. For anyone not indoctrinated into their customs and values, those institutions are strange, alien places, places of inevitable inequity. They will do us, the peaceful outsiders, no good. After all, if education were capable of teaching people to hate force and detest war, the world we live in would be quite different. Yet the facts of history prove, Woolf says, "that education, far from teaching the educated generosity and magnanimity, makes them on the contrary so anxious to keep their possessions … in their own hands, that they will use not force but much subtler methods than force when they are asked to share them".[4] (Woolf knew this to be true even without having attended a faculty meeting.) The basic values of the university, its processes and traditions, all encourage the kinds of emotions and desires that fuel war — so what good is it for someone who desires to end war?

We could say the same for our current educational reality in America, whether about war or innumerable other injustices. Matt Brim points this out with Queer Studies as his model. As a field, Queer Studies loves the rebel pose, loves to cosplay revolutionary transgression while its most prominent scholars breathe deep the rarefied air of some of the wealthiest institutions on the planet. And yet if we look at the actual achievements of the field, it doesn't really seem that the democratization of education is a central goal. If it is, then our work has some big questions to answer about itself. Brim writes:

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[3] Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 28. I'm using here the 2006 Harcourt paperback edition edited and annotated by Jane Marcus, a remarkable — and fierce — work of scholarship.

[4] Woolf, 38.

> If the disruptive democratization of higher education has been Queer Studies' goal, dating back perhaps to the first conference of the Gay Academic Union in 1973, we have since failed. With notable exceptions, the field of Queer Studies as an academic formation has been and is still defined and propelled by the immense resources of precisely those institutions of higher education that most steadfastly refuse to serve representative numbers of poor students and to hire faculty without high-status academic pedigrees.[5]

Judged by its institutional practices, Queer Studies, like many — maybe most — academic disciplines simply does not want the grubby poor, the rough-around-the-edges students, or the people like me, the graduates of programs without international prestige. Because the engines of prestige and honor for most disciplines are housed within wealthy institutions, those disciplines inevitably serve the ideology of those institutions, which is to support and maintain the hegemony that allows those institutions to hoard their wealth, promote their prestige, and replicate inequalities. If a wealthy school creates a multi-million dollar center to attract one famous scholar, it is quite something for that famous scholar to then pretend to be a radical.

Woolf knew this. It is why the first impulse in her discussion of colleges is to say to hell with them. Her first impulse is toward destruction. This guinea, she wants to tell the honorary treasurer, should be earmarked

> 'Rags. Petrol. Matches'. And this note should be attached to it. 'Take this guinea and with it burn the college to the ground. Set fire to the old hypocrisies. Let the light of the burning building scare the nightingales and incarnadine the willows. And let

[5] Brim, 9.

> the daughters of educated men dance round the fire and heap armful upon armful of dead leaves upon the flames. And let their mothers lean from the upper windows and cry "Let it blaze! Let it blaze! For we have done with this 'education'!"'[6]

Quickly, she admits that this is more emotion than practicality. It is a hollow statement, a rage from a wound. We need universities, we need education, and we need them for practical reasons — if any marginalized person is to have a hope of escaping the manifold oppressions the world sends their way, they must have some education to be able to do so. Thus, while it is imperative to recognize that the situation has led us to want to set fire to all, to blow it all up and dance around the flames, when we stop and reflect and cool down a bit, we know that what we really need are practical steps forward. Woolf offers a few toward her goal of teaching people to hate war: we teachers can, she says, "refuse to teach any art or science that encourages war. Further, we can pour mild scorn upon chapels, upon degrees, and upon the value of examinations. … If we are asked to lecture, we can refuse to bolster up the vain and vicious system of lecturing by refusing to lecture. And of course, if we are offered honors and degrees for ourselves we can refuse them".[7] Scorn, but mild. No rags, petrol, and matches, but refusal. Stand on the outskirts of Omelas and ferry food to the miserable child in the basement. The sad fact is, Woolf concludes, "we must help to rebuild the college which, imperfect as it may be, is the only alternative to the education of the private house. We must hope that in time that education may be altered".[8]

Brim, too, ends up with practical goals. While his book begins as polemic — and a very necessary polemic — it soon transitions to pedagogies and practices. Brim's idea of the queer

[6] Woolf, 45.
[7] Woolf, 46.
[8] Woolf, 49.

ferry is a valuable one, as is his idea of making the undercommons a less abstract idea. Stop pretending to be Robin Hood and really be him, Brim exhorts us. If you are in a position to steal from the rich and give to the poor, do so. If you are given power and/or wealth, redistribute them.

(Redistributing the wealth of rich institutions does not necessarily mean theft or reappropriation.[9] Here's a recent example: Michigan State University's libraries donated money to JSTOR to make a collection of materials devoted to HIV, AIDS, and the arts become open access in 2022.[10] At a time when a lot of libraries are getting defunded, this commitment to helping keep knowledge open is exemplary. The MSU libraries could, I assume, have hoarded their money and built up their own collections. Instead, they have used their wealth to enrich us all.)

One of Brim's insights is that Rich Queer Studies has some things to learn from Poor Queer Studies. His chapters on pedagogy are beautiful, and they help move us away from the abstractions of ivory tower elites and into the classrooms with broken equipment, the classrooms where students and teachers both get through night classes with sustenance from vending machines. The chapter on the place of mothers within the Queer Studies classroom ought to be required reading throughout academia. Uncertain whether you are teaching Rich Queer Studies or Poor Queer Studies? One gauge: How many times do parents need to bring their children to class because they don't have child care for them? (For me, it's at least once a term in my classes, often more. From the first day, I tell students that they are always welcome to bring their kids.)

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[9] However, I hasten to add: I am not categorically opposed either to theft or reappropriation from rich institutions. When such institutions are based in ideas of enclosure and exclusion, stealing from them to reduce that enclosure and exclusion is justified — indeed, noble.

[10] "MSU Libraries helps Reveal Digital's upcoming collection to become OA", JSTOR, 25 October 2021, https://about.jstor.org/news/msu-libraries-helps-reveal-digitals-upcoming-collection-to-become-oa/

Putting Woolf and Brim together opens up for us a Poor Queer Studies for a Society of Outsiders. If *Three Guineas* is famous, it is famous for Woolf's proposal of outsiders as able to make and deploy community together. For Woolf, the position of outsider is an epistemological position. She says that when a soldier says, "'I am fighting to protect our country' and thus seeks to rouse her patriotic emotion, she will ask herself, 'What does "our country" mean to me an outsider?'"[11] Poorness and queerness both create outsiderness. What Woolf and Brim together teach me — their linked pedagogy — is to continue to ask the question of what do all the practices of higher education, rich and poor, mean to me, a queer study-er? And then, what does Queer Studies mean to me? What might it mean?

In between wanting to burn the colleges down and offering some practical advice for things to refuse, Woolf imagined not rejecting the position of a poor college, but embracing it. The poor college, Woolf wrote, must not teach

> the arts of dominating other people; not the arts of ruling, of killing, of acquiring land and capital. They require too many overhead expenses; salaries and uniforms and ceremonies. The poor college must teach only the arts that can be taught cheaply and practised by poor people; such as medicine, mathematics, music, painting and literature. It should teach the arts of human intercourse; the art of understanding other people's lives and minds, and the little arts of talk, of dress, of cookery that are allied with them. The aim of the new college, the cheap college, should be not to segregate and specialize, but to combine. It should explore the ways in which mind and body can be made to co-

[11] Woolf, 127.

> operate; discover what new combinations make good wholes in human life.[12]

As excited as this vision seems to make her, Woolf breaks off. It is too much utopia too soon. It is too easily dismissed by the honorary treasurer as impossible. Better to work toward what can be done in the short term to make such a vision seem less like a dream.

Similarly, Brim ends up encouraging us to find what is specific in our situations, what teaching we might do at a local level, what ways we might continue to seek the most productively critical pedagogies, what ways we can challenge ourselves to expand our empathies and generate, to borrow a term from Kathleen Fitzpatrick, the most generous thinking.

Woolf encourages us to find new words and new methods, and to remain outsiders. "We can best help you to prevent war not by joining your society but by remaining outside your society but in cooperation with its aim."[13] Similarly, we can reinvigorate the subversive, regenerative power of Queer Studies within higher education by seeking ways to preserve our outsider status, the status that keeps us separate from the hegemonic power of wealth. We can learn from the poor — and learn that *poor* has many meanings. With our outsider status we can then do the work to build outsider societies that truly do reappropriate the wealth and build a more just and equitable world for us all, poor, rich, queer, and allied together.

—January 2022

[12] Woolf, 43.
[13] Woolf, 170.

On Not Knowing Professors: Virginia Woolf's Outsider Pedagogy for Common Readers

I delivered the following essay as a paper at the 2025 Modernist Studies Association conference in Boston.[1] *For convenience, a list of references appears at the end of this chapter rather than in the bibliography.*

In her 1938 polemical pacifist book *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf discussed, alongside institutions such as the church and the government, the institution of schools, particularly colleges, and their relationship to war, militarism, masculinity, fascism. She noted, as she had previously in *A*

[1] A paragraph or so is repeated from a chapter I have in the upcoming book *The Routledge Companion to Virginia Woolf* and another paragraph or so derives from my July 2024 post "Commonalities" (https://matthewcheney.net/blog/commonalities/). Everything else is original to this paper. Since it is all part of some thinking I'm currently doing about Woolf, institutions, education, etc., it is possible I will build from some of this material, or at least similar material, in the future. (Thanks to a lively, generative conversation with fellow presenters, the audience for the paper, and friends, I am thinking about Woolf and ideas of impermanence…)

I seem to need to think about Woolf reiteratively — bits and pieces of work I've been doing for over 10 years now on Woolf, fascism, and didacticism keep finding new forms in articles, in my PhD dissertation, in *Modernist Crisis & the Pedagogy of Form* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), and in my book *Asterisks* (punctum books, 2026), for instance. My work on Woolf, institutions, education, etc. is following the same path, so in addition to "Commonalities" and the *Routledge Companion* chapter, this paper should be considered a cousin to my 2022 MLA paper "Poor Queer Studies for a Society of Outsiders", an earlier chapter herein.

Room of One's Own, the unequal status of women's colleges versus men's, but her analysis in 1938 is more caustic than it had been a decade earlier, more skeptical, more despairing. Hitler had taken over Germany, the British Union of Fascists had marched in the London streets, and Woolf had suffered losses, including the death of her nephew Julian Bell, who had gone to Spain to fight against Franco.

Addressing a more-or-less imaginary request for a donation from the head of a women's college, Woolf wrote:

> Shall I send it or shan't I? If I send it, what shall I ask them to do with it? Shall I ask them to rebuild the college on the old lines? Or shall I ask them to rebuild it, but differently? Or shall I ask them to buy rags and petrol and Bryant & May's matches and burn the college to the ground?[2]

Woolf's perspective was avowedly and determinedly that of an outsider. She spoke of an Outsider's society and of education for outsiders.

Susan Stanford Friedman in 1992 offered an insight that linked Woolf's later, Outsider-focused writings with her earlier literary essays, collected in the 1925 and 1931 *Common Reader* volumes. "The defining element of the 'common reader,'" Friedman wrote, "is his or her positionality as 'outside' culture — or to be more precise, since no one can exist 'outside' culture, as one who occupies and interrogates the borders between canonical and marginalized traditions."[3]

Woolf's critique and, indeed, rejection of institutional thinking, and her demonstration of an uninstitutionalized praxis inspires me as a teacher, reader, and writer today by forcing me to question the attachment I have to the idea of learning as an institutionalized endeavor. If, as I have come to believe, it is impossible to maintain an unoppressive pedagogy

[2] Woolf, *Three Guineas* (hereafter TG), 42.
[3] Friedman, 118.

within the oppressive institution of neoliberal American education in an ever-more-fascist United States … then what are we left with?

As Beth Rigel Daugherty, Christine Kenyon Jones, Anna Snaith, and others have shown, Woolf had more experiences with institutional education than she generally portrayed herself as having, but, nonetheless, in comparison to most people in the U.K. and North America today, her time in schools was brief. And in comparison to her male relatives, friends, and peers, her formal, institutional education was minimal. She was throughout her life surrounded by the people she called, in *Three Guineas,* the "educated men" — the men of Bloomsbury in particular, most of whom had first met each other at Cambridge. Woolf's writing returns to questions of education again and again, and it often (perhaps even usually) explores those questions while also exploring institutions: their histories, ideologies, functions, effects, and oppressions. This is absolutely explicit in *Three Guineas,* but it is also clear in *A Room of One's Own,* a work centered on institutional and educational deprivations.

The institutional critique and educational — indeed, pedagogical — purpose of the two *Common Reader* volumes is more implied than stated, but it suffuses and in fact shapes both books. What the *Common Reader* books make clear is that while pedagogy will not save us, pedagogy may be vital to a liberatory praxis.

For the sake of time and to avoid dissipating into a fog of unsupported generalizations, I am going to focus here on the first *Common Reader* collection. While there is much potentially fruitful work to be done in comparing and contrasting the two books to each other, what I have to say here about institutions and pedagogy in the first book is easily applied to the second (whose last chapter, we should remember, is an essay with the pedagogical title "How Should One Read a Book?").

Woolf's inclinations are always to approach canonical writing from the outsider's perspective. For instance, the first essay in *The Common Reader* (after a brief preface) concerns itself with Chaucer — but it is not a standard literary essay about Chaucer. Instead, it approaches Chaucer via the Paston Letters, a collection of correspondence between and concerning the Paston family of Norfolk between 1422 and 1509. But it doesn't even really begin with those well-known, well-bred members of the English gentry; it begins, instead, with ruins:

> The tower of Caister Castle still rises ninety feet into the air, and the arch still stands from which Sir John Fastolf's barges sailed out to fetch stone for the building of the great castle. But now jackdaws nest on the tower, and of the castle, which once covered six acres of ground, only ruined walls remain, pierced by loop-holes and surmounted by battlements, though there are neither archers within nor cannon without. As for the "seven religious men" and the "seven poor folk" who should, at this very moment, be praying for the souls of Sir John and his parents, there is no sign of them nor sound of their prayers. The place is a ruin.[4]

The essay starts by getting us to reconcile our knowledge with the past, to imagine our way toward these ruins, to rebuild them in our imagination and to imagine people in them. This is analogous to what she wants us to do with the literary past as well. We get necessary background on the families in *The Paston Letters*, but Woolf's attention always goes toward the marginalized people, even among the wealthy and powerful. Mrs. Paston, for instance. Like everyone of their class, the Pastons sought to "buy land, to build great houses, to stuff these houses full of gold and silver plate (though the privy might well

[4] Woolf, *Common Reader* (hereafter CR), 3.

be in the bedroom)", an acquisitive quest that was, they thought, "the proper aim of mankind".[5]

Woolf says of Mrs. Paston's "long, long letters" that they could have included tales of the wars of her youth or the difficulties of her life as a woman, but they do not. Woolf's paragraphs in this essay are all many lines long — except for one: "But Mrs Paston did not talk about herself."[6] Woolf's impeccable sense of rhythm comes through in her paragraphing, but here her purpose isn't basic prosody as much as it is a call to focus attention. The long paragraphs are full of details and divagations, sometimes sprawling, sometimes overwhelming, but this single short paragraph, this utterly uncomplex sentence floating separate from all the masses around it — *But Mrs. Paston did not talk about herself.* — brings the laser of our attention to something essential, something more than a bit of trivia or local color or historical flourish. From the ruins of greatness and the everyday lives of long-forgotten families, we find our way to Mrs. Paston's silence and to the works of Chaucer.

Or, rather, we find our way to the Pastons' reading of Chaucer, because that's what this essay is really about. How people read and write, how they make sense of language, how they participate or don't participate in the world of words. Chaucer is canonical, but Mrs. Paston is not, and it is Mrs. Paston who is of as much interest to Woolf as the teller of Canterbury tales.

Throughout *The Common Reader,* Woolf is concerned with epistemology. How do we make meaning of literature and its history, how do we perceive readers of the past, how do we bridge the centuries — how, in the end, can we claim to know anything? These questions are subtly raised in "The Pastons and Chaucer" and then become more explicit in the next chapter, "On Not Knowing Greek". This essay is much less

[5] CR, 6.
[6] CR, 6.

about knowing Ancient Greek as a language than it is about the challenge and perhaps impossibility of knowing, truly knowing, the mindsets and personalities of people who lived so long ago. Then the third chapter, "The Elizabethan Lumber Room", brings the analysis of language, history, and reading to the question of the astonishing difference in quality between Elizabethan poetry and Elizabethan prose, a question that leads Woolf ultimately to make some claims for the relationship between self-consciousness (literal self-consciousness, the consciousness of the self) and prose, proposing that "the sublime genius of Thomas Browne" was among the first to prefigure modern prose writing. Browne's "immense egotism has paved the way for all psychological novelists, autobiographers, confession-mongers, and dealers in the curious shades of our private life. He it was who first turned from the contacts of men with men to their lonely life within."[7]

By the next chapter — this one concerning Elizabethan theatre — Woolf's pedagogical impulses come to the fore. She is not simply proposing ideas about Elizabethan literature and English literary history, she is offering instruction in how to read, understand, and appreciate it. She instructs us to "draw in those filaments of sensibility which the moderns have so marvellously developed, use instead the ear and the eye which the moderns have so basely starved, hear words as they are laughed and shouted, not as they are printed in black letters on the page, see before your eyes the changing faces and living bodies of men and women, put yourself, in short, into a different, but not more elementary stage of your reading development and then the true merits of Elizabethan drama will assert themselves."[8] This remains good advice — indeed, advice we might even today give to students.

[7] CR, 45.
[8] CR, 55.

These first chapters set up the moves that Woolf will make throughout the rest of the book. Because of her pedagogical inclinations, *The Common Reader* can serve as a kind of seminar on approaching literature from an outsider's point of view. This is not exactly an anticanonical approach — though there are plenty of anticanonical moments throughout both *Common Reader* volumes, the overall thrust of these books is to encourage readers toward confidence in the face of the canon and its authorities.

Woolf's preferred pedagogy was dialogic: a give and take between speaker and audience that makes the barriers between them porous and renders the task of learning into a play of ideas. In her 1940 essay "The Leaning Tower", Woolf derided "the pedagogic, the didactic, the loud speaker strain" in younger writers' work: "They must teach; they must preach".[9] Such a formulation is more than a statement about Woolf's younger peers: it expresses assumptions about the endeavor of teaching as much as it expresses aesthetic preferences. Teaching, in Woolf's conception, easily slips into preaching, a monologic action where the preacher is the lone authority and the audience's only task is to listen. This was a longstanding position for her. Melba Cuddy-Keane draws from Woolf's 1918 review of Joan and Peter: The Story of an Education by H.G. Wells to assert that "Woolf continually encourages a reading practice of 'talking back' but, on the writer's side, her implication here is that the approach of 'talking to or with' — as opposed to 'talking at' — is preferable not because it lends a 'nicer' construction to the speaker but because it converts confrontation into dialogic negotiation".[10]

In addition to aligning with Paulo Freire's notions of critical pedagogy, which encourage just such dialogism and the decentering of the all-knowing, authoritarian teacher figure,

[9] Woolf, *Essays* vol. 6, 272.
[10] Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere*, 134.

Woolf's writings, in their skepticism toward institutions, align well with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *Undercommons*, where the second chapter, titled "The University and the Undercommons", begins with an all-caps statement: "THE ONLY POSSIBLE RELATIONSHIP TO THE UNIVERSITY TODAY IS A CRIMINAL ONE". Harney and Moten then write that in the U.S. today "it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment. In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of — this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university."[11]

As higher education as we know it collapses into ruins around us, we need, I think, to return to the sense of pedagogy I see in Woolf's writings — pedagogy not as the construction of syllabi or the arrangement of curricula, which of course has its place, but must be posterior to the development of real intellectual values that exist separate from and regardless of institutions. A curious person who has little formal educational background can pick up *The Common Reader* and discover a different way of looking at a cultural heritage, the outsider's way. If that person is willing to do some work, Woolf is there alongside them to offer not only guidance but dialectical questions and mischievous provocations and productive ambiguities. Woolf is not a professor in any institutional sense, but she is an intellectual and a teacher, and she uses her intellect and her experience to shape her writings into opportunities for learning.

This makes me think of something Stuart Hall said late in his life, in a 2011 interview, looking back on the remarkable work of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the

[11] Harney & Moten, 26.

University of Birmingham, where he worked in the 1960s and '70s, including as director from 1972 to 1979. "I never felt I was in academia except to describe it to other people," Hall said. "...It's how I've made my living. But I don't think of myself as an academic. I think of myself as an intellectual and a teacher. Not an academic. I'm critical of academia as an institutional space."[12]

Discussing the differences between the relatively free and even fugitive work the Center did during his time there, in comparison to the more regulated processes it had to adjust to in the more regulated environment of the 1980s, Hall said:

> We blurred the lines. Today this is not possible. …it's partly about managerialism in the university. Whoever is a student must be registered. They must pay fees. We must know who they are. The others must either finish within five years or give it up. All of that atmosphere which comes into the universities in the 1980s. It's a Thatcherite turn as it were. The sort of authoritarian management of the university does not leave any room for manoeuvre, for freedom, so it does a great deal of harm.[13]

In its heyday, the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies was more or less ignored by university administration because it was inexpensive, scrappy, gloriously marginalized. Of course, those days when anything was allowed to be scrappy and glorious in its marginalization within an institution are mostly gone, smothered under spreadsheets and endless assessments, but it is a vision worth preserving, one Woolf herself spoke about in *Three Guineas* as the affordances of a poor college, her utopian ideal of an educational institution, "an experimental college, an adventurous college. Let it be built on lines of its own. It must be built not of carved stone and stained

[12] Hall, 773.
[13] Hall, 771.

glass, but of some cheap, easily combustible material which does not hoard dust and perpetrate traditions."[14]

This vision is one that makes the college highly susceptible to catching fire, but that for Woolf is a good thing — we must always have our Bryant and May's matches at hand, ready to render into cinders any infrastructure that has grown too solid, too imposing, too dominating. We should devote ourselves to what is inexpensive to teach, and we must remember what it is we actually value in learning and teaching. "The aim of the new college," Woolf said, "the cheap college, should be not to segregate and specialize, but to combine. It should explore the ways in which mind and body can be made to co-operate; discover what new combinations make good wholes in human life."[15]

Woolf did what she could do as an intellectual, a writer, a reader, and a teacher. She remained skeptical of institutions and did not tie herself to them, but she shared her knowledge, experiences, ideas, and, yes, pedagogies via books available at public libraries and in bookshops, priced so that ordinary people could read them — as the many letters readers sent her showed, in fact, they did. Like Stuart Hall, she did not aspire to be an academic, but to be an intellectual, a writer, a reader, and a teacher.

What, I wonder, might she make of us?

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[14] TG, 43.
[15] TG, 43.

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—October 2025

Into the Open: A 2015 Conversation with Robin DeRosa

I was in graduate school, working on my PhD, when my friend Robin DeRosa got seriously and professionally interested in the idea of Open Educational Resources (OERs). Though I had been interested in Open Access for a long time, I had never heard of OERs. I was a bit skeptical of some elements of OER advocacy, but I also knew I was quite ignorant of what was actually going on. So I decided to interview Robin for my website, *The Mumpsimus*.

This rather quick and informal exchange in many ways started me on paths I would follow for the next decade, and so it seems appropriate to reprint it here. Though both Robin and I have come quite far from the place of this interview, and the high ed landscape has certainly changed in that time, it seems important to hold onto this original moment of exploration and inspiration. I have not, therefore, edited the interview at all.

Q&A on Open Educational Resources with Robin DeRosa

June 09, 2015

My friend and colleague (when I was adjuncting at Plymouth State University [2008-2013]) Robin DeRosa has been spending a lot of time recently thinking about and working with "open educational resources" (OER), which Wikipedia (today) defines as "freely accessible, openly licensed documents and media that are useful for teaching, learning, and assessing as well as for research purposes."[1]

I've been following Robin's ideas about OER, and at a certain point realized I didn't really understand the conversation. Partly, this was because most of what I was reading was Twitter feeds and Twitter can be confusing, but as an outsider to the OER world, I also didn't know what sorts of assumptions advocates were working from. I was especially concerned when thinking about academic labor — all the talk of giving things away and making things free sounded to me like a wonderful idea that would in practice just devalue academic work and lead to further exploitation within the highly exploitative world of academia. At the same time, I'm strongly attracted to open resources of various sorts (I'm writing this on a blog, after all!), and so, thinking about it all, I felt befuddled.

The easiest way to get answers to my befuddlements and to allay (or stoke) my fears was, of course, to ask Robin some questions. So that's what I did.

Originally, I intended this to be more of an interview, with me adding more questions after she answered a few, but her

[1] Of course, the Wikipedia page is now significantly revised and far more comprehensive than it was in 2015. Wikipedia is really one of the great triumphs of the open internet.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_educational_resources

answers to my first set of questions were so comprehensive that I thought adding to it all would be a bit much. Better to get the conversation rolling, and let it play out in the comments section here and/or on Twitter, other websites, etc.

I can't say I'm not still a little befuddled. But Robin's replies to my queries did help clear up some of my primary fears and misconceptions.

And now, before we begin, an official bio:

> Robin DeRosa is professor of English and chair of Interdisciplinary Studies at Plymouth State University, and she is also a consultant for the OER Ambassador Pilot at the University of New Hampshire. Recently named as an editor of *Hybrid Pedagogy* (a digital journal of learning, teaching, and technology), in August 2015 she'll be be a Hybrid Pedagogy Fellow at the Digital Pedagogy Lab at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her essay "Selling the Story: From Salem Village to Witch City" was published by the open uneducational resource *The Revelator* in 2011.[2] You can find out more about

[2] *The Revelator* was an online magazine I edited with Eric Schaller. Robin's essay is available at http://revelatormagazine.com/nonfiction/selling-the-story-from-salem-village-to-witch-city/.

> Robin at her website [robinderosa.net] or follow her on Twitter: @actualham.[3]

Matthew Cheney: In the idea of *open educational resources*, what does *open* mean?

Robin DeRosa: Generally, OER practitioners tend to use the Hewlett Foundation definition of "Open Educational Resources:

> OER are teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use and re-purposing by others. Open educational resources include full courses,

Robin's current bio (January 2026) reads: "Dr. Robin DeRosa is an educator and community leader who has served in many roles over the span of her career. She has been a middle school theater teacher, a high school literature and writing teacher, and a college professor of both English and Interdisciplinary Studies. She has served in public higher education as the founder and director of a teaching and learning center, and as a university library director. An author of several books on history and culture, she has produced a guidebook on women's history for a state park in California and been a speaker for New Hampshire Humanities Council on topics such as the Salem Witch Trials and the Old Man of the Mountain. Robin has served as the President of the Board of Directors for a county domestic violence agency, and served on several other nonprofit councils, technology advisory boards, and local agencies. Robin has received numerous awards for her contributions to the public good, including the 2020 New England Higher Education Excellence Award from the New England Board of Higher Education, bestowed in honor of her work on college affordability in the region." (robinderosa.net)

[3] Robin was a star of Twitter, but left it, as did most other sane people, when it was taken over by Elon Musk. She still uses the @actualham handle for Mastodon, Blue Sky, and Instagram.

> course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software, and any other tools, materials, or techniques used to support access to knowledge.[4]

Another way to think of "open" is to use the libre/gratis definitions of "free." For materials to be "open," they need to be both free as in no-cost (gratis) and free as in free to repurpose and share (libre). In addition, we generally think of open materials as allowing learners/teachers to do all of the 5 R's with those materials: reuse, revise, remix, redistribute, and retain (these are David Wiley's criteria; the fifth R was added more recently to contrast OER with "free" ebooks that disappear after a certain amount of time, or rental textbooks, etc.).[5] Key to all of this is the Creative Commons license, which is the general way that creators of OER make it easy to share materials.

MC: I've seen OER offered as a solution to high textbook prices, and that both gives me hope and gives me fear. On the one hand, I'm all for anything that reduces the cost of some of the ridiculous textbook prices out there — I didn't assign a (pretty good) book on writing about film to my film classes because it was a little paperback that would sell for maybe $12 if it were a trade book but instead retails for almost $2/page. That's just robbery. I would have loved a website like the Purdue OWL for writing about film. Instead, I made do with a mélange of materials.

On the other hand, not all textbooks are the same. Some are actually a good deal for the buyer (*The Craft of Research*,

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[4] "Open Educational Resources: Breaking the Lockbox on Education" by Heath Wickline, William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, 26 November 2013. https://hewlett.org/open-educational-resources-breaking-the-lockbox-on-education/

[5] "The Access Compromise and the 5th R" by David Wiley, opencontent.org, 5 March 2014. https://opencontent.org/blog/archives/3221

which I use when I teach first-year composition, is full of great information and is pretty cheap), but more importantly, I think especially in English classes there's a value to the book as material object, an extraordinary technology of its own, and I don't want to lose that. (I came to this discipline because I like books! And now I have to get rid of my books?!) Further, I fear the message sent: *books should be cheap or free, they shouldn't have value, paying money for books is a bad thing*. That message seems to me disastrous in a bunch of different ways. Schools require students to pay a lot of money in fees for all sorts of things that are not as central to education as books are. Why devalue books?

RD: Before I really jump in on this, I will first state the obvious: much OER has little in common with "books." OER includes video lectures, podcasts, PPTs, problem sets, simulations, interactive games, quizzes, etc. etc. etc. But let's just stay focused on your question, which is about books.

There are so many tendrils that one could follow in responding to this, and I will pick out a few to chew on, but I don't expect it all to add up to an answer that completes the conversation. Obviously the importance of "the book" in culture is just a terrifically rich site for debate right now, particular amongst those who are interested in the future of the library (or, as we are fond of calling it at my own institution, "the learning commons." Hey! We are not just about books anymore!). So without touching too much of that, I might suggest a few things. First, I think the end goal of a program without books is a misguided application of OER. Some programs, like Tidewater Community College's "Z Degree" (in which the "Z" stands for "zero"—hmmm), are garnering huge press over complete degree programs that have no costs for learning materials…which does most likely mean no conventional books. While there may be certain kinds of programs that can thrive intellectually without books, I know that no program in which I currently teach

could do that. So I think with OER, it's very important to really define what we mean by "book."

I think the definition changes quite a lot from case to case. If a book is just writing that is on paper and bound, then a technical manual on electrical wiring, a biology textbook, a poetry chapbook, and a phone book all qualify. I love a good smelling Borzoi novel, and I don't think I'd equate the pleasure of reading it to the experience of reading the Grainger industrial catalog (though my partner would actually totally counter me on this). I just offer this to suggest that we might not always know what we mean—and we might not always agree with each other about what we mean—when we say that we "like books." I think, then, it falls to OER practitioners to determine what the purpose of the book is in the educational process. For example, if the materials are created solely to help students learn (the project for most textbooks, I would imagine), then as a believer in public education, I think those materials should be free to students. The growing availability of OER in most fields is clearly demonstrating that we do not need to pay 3rd-party vendors enormous sums of money to curate and distribute these materials; most open pedagogues actually believe that static, unchanging, single-author, non-collaborative textbooks are generally not as useful as the kinds of materials that generate over time when the materials can be revised by users. So I think where textbooks are concerned, no-cost is a no-brainer, and openly-licensed is in the best interest of the community that textbooks intend to serve.

For other kinds of "books," open might not make sense. While the public domain license on Shakespeare plays allows for cool remixing, we also do want to read *Hamlet* in its original and protected form. I think if a book is functioning as an "artifact," meaning that its stability in its physical form is part of where its value inheres, then that might be more like a commodity, and something to pay for; for this reason, my English courses still often require students to buy novels and

other literary texts. Basically, I think every adoption needs to be set into its pedagogical context, and then it should be easier for faculty to make decisions: always choose the text that works best for the learning that's happening in your course. For textbooks, I think the other benefits that "open" affords (customizing, remixing, collaborating, students shifting from consumers to producers, etc.) make the no-cost condition the *least* of what's awesome about choosing OER. In other cases, a book that we pay for may be absolutely perfect (if students can afford it).

I also want to add here that I think there is too much silence amongst OER practitioners about what it means to transfer from a reader of print to a reader of digital materials. While students clearly spend many, many hours a day reading off screens, there is lots of research (please, don't quote it to me) that suggests that we aren't processing information the same way when we read digitally. Leaving aside for a minute my own melancholia (manufactured for you, Matthew, since I don't know if I really have it) about losing "books," I certainly think that teachers should spend time thinking about what pedagogical work needs to be done if we move a course from print to digital. Most OER has print-on-demand options that allow us to make digital materials look pretty much like conventional books (without the smell and feel and such…I know, I know). But what do we lose when we reify these dynamic materials this way?

My colleague, Scott Robison, who directs my university's Learning Technologies office, once remarked how interesting it was to browse the materials at a site like Open Stax and see that the OER is organized into what are called "books" (and they look like pictures of books…even though many of them will never exist in three-dimensional printed form). Scott has also raised the question of whether we should talk about the "quality" of OER in the same way that we talk about the "quality" of a textbook (this is a rich debate in the field right now,

stemming from a post by David Wiley); OER is only really OER (inasmuch as it depends on its openness) if it is a process, in movement, embedded in pedagogy, and deeply engaged in a reciprocal relationship with its users.[6] I would advocate that we not think about OER as a replacement for books, but think of it as a process, which should be theorized differently from the way that we theorize "books." The bottom line in terms of practicality here, though, is that I also believe that we need to do better to identify the challenges in digital reading and annotation, so we can begin to create better pedagogical tools to help work through those challenges; in this way, we can fully capitalize on the potential of open materials, a potential which does so often depend on their digital format.

MC: How can OER and an understanding of academic labor as labor work together? Since we don't (yet) live in a utopian society, we're stuck in a neoliberal/capitalist system of exploitation, and academia is at least as exploitative as every other institution. How can OER avoid further devaluing academic labor? And not just devalue academic labor, but avoid further expanding the huge divide between the academic haves and have-nots — it's one thing for a tenured Ivy League professor to give their work away, but what about the adjunct who makes $20,000 a year and has no health insurance or retirement or anything, and who is vastly more typical of today's professoriate than the tenured Ivy League prof is?

RD: If we think of OER as just free stuff, then we do see some of the same problems inherent in the production of OER as we see with the production of regular textbooks. While it may

[6] See "Stop Saying 'High Quality'" by David Wiley, opencontent.org, 27 March 2015: https://opencontent.org/blog/archives/3821 and "Exceptional Quality" by Scott Robison, otterscotter.wordpress.com, 15 March 2015: https://otterscotter.wordpress.com/2015/03/15/quality.
(Something is off with the dates on those posts — the Wiley was published before the Robison — but those are the dates on them now.)

seem that an adjunct could make out better by publishing a conventional textbook for which they could be paid royalties or even an advance, writing a textbook still takes "free" time, and getting it published still often takes the cred of having a full-time institutional affiliation. For the last collection I published (before I figured out that I really have no interest in publishing this way anymore), I had to switch from one academic press to another because the first one would not take the collection unless I decreased the ratio of non-tenure-track folks (grad students, adjuncts, independent scholars, and non-academics) to tenure-track folks; they requested this after accepting the proposal but before reading any of the content, so this was not about the quality of the work. Academic publishing is a mess right now, and I always want to make sure that when we critique the problems with open publishing, we do that in a way that sets those problems in conversation with the problems in conventional publishing, which are many (I am not enumerating them here).

So OER may be no worse than conventional publishing in terms of the ways that it can exclude contingent labor, but I know there are fears that OER can exploit contingent labor in a particular way. For example, if an adjunct creates some kick-ass OER, is it possible that it might get co-opted by the institution for which she works, and used to dramatically increase revenues by contributing to the production of course shells that are pre-packaged, assigned to very low-cost labor (or maybe, ultimately, used in a course with virtually no teacher at all)? Should an adjunct give away their intellectual property to an institution that doesn't even pay them a living wage, thereby strengthening the institution and perhaps further devaluing their own importance within it? I don't want to pretend this isn't a valid or real concern, but I might offer some other ways to think about OER that are more liberatory, ways that resist rhetoric like "co-opt," "property," and "production."

First, I might suggest that OER is value-less without teachers and students. In other words, you can't "steal" someone's OER, because it is not a product with a stable existence that can exist in a constant way outside of how it is situated into a course and engaged with by learners. OER is just free stuff (there's lots of that all over the internet) if it's treated this way. But for us to understand the true potential of "open," we need to help faculty see OER in a more complicated and process-oriented way. Joss Winn and Richard Hall are the two people I look to for help in thinking this through. Winn argues that OER misses the mark by attending to the "freedom of things" rather than the "freedom of people."[7] He suggests—after problematizing open ed philosophies that fail to critique the private and corporate qualities of university institutions that sustain most open ed work right now – that we should insist on open education as a transformative tool to help us build cooperative forms of higher education. In "Open education and the emancipation of academic labour," he envisions a post-capitalist model (wasn't it Whitman who wrote, "Am I a Marxist? Very well, then I am a Marxist"), and he argues that CC licenses should be revised so that they work in concert with a public "commons"; openly licensed materials should be free for non-profits, but for-profit companies would have to contribute back to the commons or else pay a fee to use the materials (more about this proposal can be found in Michel Bauwens' post on cooperativism in the peer-to-peer age).[8] Basically, the idea here is that

[7] "Open education. From the freedom of things to the freedom of people" by Joss Winn, josswinn.org, 1 May 2012. https://josswinn.org/2012/05/01/open-education-from-the-freedom-of-things-to-the-freedom-of-people

[8] "Open education and the emancipation of academic labour" by Joss Winn, josswinn.org, 17 March 2015: https://josswinn.org/2015/03/17/open-education-and-the-emancipation-of-academic-labour. The Bauwens post is no longer available at the original site, but a copy was posted at https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Why_We_Need_a_New_Kind_of_Open_Cooperativism_for_the_P2P_Age. Much more material on Open Cooperativism is available at https://wiki.p2pfoundation.net/Open_Cooperativism_Reading_List.

education must be for the public good, and that OER is a step toward rethinking where the real value actually *is* in the educational system (with the people, not with the institutions). This, ultimately, could open us up to a radical restructuring of higher ed, where those who teach and contribute are not exploited by institutions that do little but mediate and discipline academic labor.

Richard Hall really pushes these ideas into territory that excites me, and he's also been nice enough to talk with me about where to start with some of the good questions you have asked. Hall calls for open, participatory publics and co-ops that firmly situate the value of education within the community.[9] He thinks about MOOCs as spaces that could potentially resist neoliberal projects to control and commodify sites of learning.[10] The pitfalls here are many, as he points out. I myself have given my fair share of OER-related pitches at the administrative level in which I have demonstrated (accurately, I believe) that most institutions stand to make significant financial gains by implementing OER initiatives, even as their students save money and faculty develop new and exciting pedagogies. It sounds like a win-win-win. Many schools use MOOCs to advertise and then sell their closed content and credentials. Again it seems like a win-win: students can study for free, and the institution only gets stronger for it. But if we use "open" as just another marketing tool, we strengthen an educational system that is deeply corrupt. So personally, I have challenged myself to think of "open" as a tool for true transformation, in which we move away from a commodities-

[9] See "On the Abolition of Academic Labour: The Relationship Between Intellectual Workers and Mass Intellectuality" by Richard Hall, *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 12, no. 2 (2014): 822–37. https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v12i2.597.

[10] Hall, Richard. "For a Political Economy of Massive Open Online Courses." *Learning, Media and Technology* 40, no. 3 (2015): 265–86. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2015.1015545.

driven market and towards a community-oriented conversation. This may not directly produce a living wage for adjunct faculty, or bring them economic gain from their intellectual property. But by focusing on the public good, by shifting intellectual "property" to the intellectual commons, by thinking less about courses, credentials, and copyrights and more about communities, access, and sharing, I think we will ultimately build a higher education landscape that is less exploitive of both students and contingent faculty. Hall notes that this would "abolish the present state of things." So I realize that lurking throughout this, there is a revolution that would deeply upset many careers and livelihoods, my own included. It's not a simple path to equity or security, for sure. But for me, open education has some promising foundational philosophy for those of us who are disgusted by the current exploitation in higher ed. I'm sick of being stuck with it, so I am heading this way, walking gingerly and trying to avoid the sly ways that institutional power can co-opt subversive movements and use them as a marketing advantage.

Into the Fugitive Open

The theme for this year's International Open Access Week is "Who Owns Our Knowledge?", a question that ought to be nonsensical, but which is becoming ever more urgent.

I cannot help but think about Open Access (OA) within the current context both of our world generally and also my own world personally. The general world's disasters are apparent for all to see, so I will not waste your time in delineating any of them right now, but I should give a basic outline of my own circumstances, because those circumstances inflect everything I will say here and lead to my sense of urgency about OA and about knowledge generally.

My colleague and supervisor Robin DeRosa was recently forced out of her job at our university, ending a long and distinguished career there.[1] I could write at length about how and why this happened — it had nothing to do with Robin herself, who has only been a boon to the university, probably the most effective leader on campus, a beloved and even legendary figure — but there is no need to go through all the details. Robin is a victim of austerity policies, neoliberal economics, and the national disinvestment in public universities and the public good.

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[1] Robin wrote about this at her website: https://robinderosa.net/higher-ed/i-lost-my-job/. She was also interviewed by *Inside Higher Ed* about the situation — see "3 Questions for Learning Innovator and Scholar Robin DeRosa" by Joshua Kim, *Inside Higher Ed*, 11 December 2025. https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/columns/learning-innovation/2025/12/11/3-questions-learning-innovator-and-scholar-robin

As Director of Learning & Libraries, Robin faced a daunting final task: helping our librarians figure out how to cut resources down to the bone. Actually, beyond the bone. We've been cutting into the bone for many years.[2]

The result of all this cutting is that our university library now has considerably less access to resources than it did even two years ago, especially electronic resources, but not solely — we subscribe to hardly any print periodicals anymore, for instance. If I publish in a closed-access journal, it is likely that my colleagues and students will not have access to that publication. I have no desire to publish in places walled off from them — walled off, in fact, from myself.

These and other circumstances have got me thinking, once again, about access, openness, knowledge, and ownership.

Open Access Is the Base, Not the Summit

For most Open Access advocates, OA exists as part of an ethical structure … but it is also easy to miss this, because we get caught up in arguments about details, about *hows* more than *whys*, and forget that OA is premised on a set of values. Within those values, OA is a beginning, not an end.

I say for *most* OA advocates, it exists as part of an ethical structure because for some it does not at all. For commercial, corporate publishers, OA is just another tool in the money-making machine, which is why they tend toward so-called "Gold OA" (gold as in what merchants hoard), shifting the cost

[2] New Hampshire funds higher education at the lowest rate of all 50 states. Double our state funding and we're still below the national average. And we are not a poor state. There are houses in my little town worth millions of dollars. But our state politicians keep cutting government revenue sources because they do not believe in the concept of the public good, and some in fact have celebrated our last-in-the-nation status, saying it demonstrates our commitment to "individual responsibility". If you're curious about New Hampshire's finances, the New Hampshire Fiscal Policy Institute is doing good work: https://nhfpi.org.

of publication to authors rather than readers via Article Processing Charges (APCs), the bane of OA for anyone with a sense of ethics.[3] It's easy to see why publishers love APCs — it shifts the income to an earlier part of the publishing process, allowing for-profit publishers not to have to think much about how well they publish anything, only how well they attract people willing and able to pay APCs to have their work published. The business model is hardly different from vanity publishing.

I've been reading Samuel A. Moore's excellent — thrilling — new book *Publishing Beyond the Market: Open Access, Care, and the Commons*, which in so many ways is the book on OA that I've been waiting for. Moore's approach to OA is entirely based in values and ethics. He notes in the introduction that he is most interested

> in seeing whether OA might be oriented to nurture a radical commons-based approach to knowledge production and dissemination. I am therefore taking it is axiomatic that publications within any commons-based system of publishing should be freely accessible as standard and that it is the commercial element that must be eradicated or left behind. This is to say that if it is possible to fund the creation and dissemination of academic publications without recourse to informational capitalism, then there is no reason for the artificial scarcity that market-based systems rely on. We can work towards

[3] In an influential 2007 "Open Access Overview", Peter Suber defined "Gold OA" thus: "Most activists refer to OA delivered by journals as gold OA (regardless of the journal's business model), and to OA delivered by repositories as green OA."
https://legacy.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/overview.htm.

That was a long time ago. I know "Gold OA" does not *have to* mean APCs and exploitation of scholars. That may have been true when the term was created, but I have seen no evidence that it is true in practice today.

> "commoning" publishing in a way that will also make academic publications free for all. I am therefore not arguing for OA as the end point of any new systems of publishing, nor am I making a case for a particular definition of OA publishing. This book is all about how to return control to academic communities, away from the privatised publishing industry.[4]

The focus on commons is dear to my heart, as my first academic presentation on an OA-related topic was titled "Gift Economies in the Gig Economy" (*the commons* being a frequent topic or reference point for ideas about gift economies — in fact, Lewis Hyde, whose book *The Gift* is the most famous text about gift economies, later wrote the book *Common as Air: Revolution, Art, and Ownership*). But of course there are problems with a general idea of the commons as a place of free stuff. I think of this as the techbro idea of the commons, because a lot of techno-utopians espouse some idea of a commons — remember "information wants to be free!"? This has led to terrible things because this idea of the commons has all the complexity and selfishness of a small child's thinking. (No wonder it's popular with Libertarians, whose political ideology is that of a small child.) But it has also led to good things such as Creative Commons. *Free stuff!* is not, though, a value.

Moore understands the dangers of a broad idea of the commons, and so goes for a more useful and ethical definition:

> When talking about the potential for publishing to be a commons, I mean loosely how it might be controlled by and answerable to different research communities, how publishing processes may be

[4] Moore, Samuel. *Publishing Beyond the Market: Open Access, Care, and the Commons*. University of Michigan Press, 2025: 10. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11781635.

> guided by ethical rather than commercial outcomes, and how the outputs may be shared with all.[5]

I'm restraining myself from quoting this entire section of his introduction — really, the whole thing is worth reading … and since it's OA, you can.

Commoners

I'm especially drawn to Moore's idea of the commons as a mode of production. Conceiving of the commons this way brings attention to the idea of the commons as a process and ethic by which people work together toward goals that have little to do with profit. In such a model, sustainability is more important than growth. *From each according to their ability, to each according to their need (and desire)…*

Seeing the commons as a mode of production also brings attention to things even a number of ethical OA advocates often downplay: labor and infrastructure.

I must confess that I sometimes feel that many of my colleagues in academia do not have a well-developed theory of labor; indeed, I often think they have no theory of labor at all. Academics are often quite willing both to be exploited and to serve as an exploiter. I am perhaps especially sensitive to this because I came to academia relatively late, taking almost a decade off between my bachelor's and master's degrees, then nearly as long between my master's and PhD. I also came to it with lots of experience in trade publishing and no experience of academic publishing. So though I was somewhat dazzled by the occasional dazzling elements of academia when I arrived, I was also utterly horrified by how much people let themselves be used by a system that obviously profited from their work without returning much, if any, remuneration.

[5] Moore, 23-24.

I remember early on when my friend David Beronä shared with me a call for papers for an encyclopedia of comics or something like that, a big expensive academic publication he thought I might want to write for. "There's nothing about pay here," I said as I looked it over. "But I guess it's an expensive book, so maybe it would be worth it for a contributor's copy or two."

David sighed. "They don't usually do that," he said.

I looked at him like he had just landed from Mars. "Wait, they want people to write for them and they won't even provide a copy of the book?"

He chuckled ruefully, then said, "Big collections like that, not usually. If there aren't too many authors they might."

I was aghast. "Who would ever write for them!" I said.

He said, "You'd be surprised."

The logic of academic publishing allows immense exploitation. It's a logic that began from a somewhat different place, one where most academics who were involved with publishing were able to make a good living as professors, their publishing work was considered an esteemed part of their professorship, and publishing was subsidized by universities and scholarly organizations — it was not commercial or profit-driven (and, in fact, rarely profitable).[6] The work of academia, for all its various faults, oppressions, and exclusions, was closer to Moore's idea of a commons, at least on the production side.

That world no longer exists, and not only because corporate and for-profit publishers entered the scene. It no longer exists because most professors are now barely able to survive on their work as professors and universities have been neoliberalized. The whole ecosystem is corrupted and rotting. But

[6] For more of this history, see the report "Untangling Academic Publishing: A History of the Relationship between Commercial Interests, Academic Prestige and the Circulation of Research" by Aileen Fyfe, Kelly Coate, Stephen Curry, Stuart Lawson, Noah Moxham, and Camilla Mørk Røstvik. Zenodo, May 2017. https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.546100.

people keep approaching publishing as if the world hasn't changed utterly, and thus allow themselves to be exploited and to be complicit with exploitation, extraction, and enclosure — the very opposite of the commons.

We can get back to a more ethical idea of scholarship. In *Achieving Global Open Access: The Need for Scientific, Epistemic and Participatory Openness*, Stephen Pinfield advocates for emphasizing "interaction and reciprocity as parts of openness", and this idea connects with my own stated values from 2018/2019: *solidarity, cooperation, coalition, refuge, regeneration*. (We still have those values posted on the wall of the CoLab, but, like many values these days, they're getting a bit ragged.) The most important point is intentionality. Open Access is a tool, not a value. We must bring values to it.

This is where infrastructure comes in. Publishing — good publishing — is labor intensive. That labor needs to be accounted for somehow. At the very least, it needs to be valued by promotion committees and offices of academic affairs. Scholarship is *work*. Publishing scholarship is also work: the work of acquisition, editing, design, production, promotion, distribution. All of this work needs to be valued and accounted for. Big publishers seem to account for it by charging APCs or pricing books at hundreds of dollars each, but scholars aren't seeing any of that money and few people in publishing other than the owners are benefiting. The money stays with upper management and stockholders, not with the people doing the actual work. It's a textbook case of exploitation, extraction, alienation.

The landscape of scholarship has changed so completely over the last 100 years that it may be foolish to think of anything within a university as a commons anymore. Better to think of the undercommons. Better to think not simply of openness, but of fugitive openness.

Fugitives

There is a sense, per the *OED*, of *fugitive* as something/someone that is "driven out, banished, exiled". This is what neoliberalism and fascism have done to ethical scholarly work over the last 50 years. We, professors and researchers and students alike, have been made fugitive.

We must think about how the commons and community can work together. We must think about how we can create not only a scholarly community but a community of fugitive scholars.

I think here of Sarah Schulman's introduction to NYRB's wonderful reissue of Diane DiMassa's *Hothead Paisan* comics, where Schulman talks about the fugitive lesbian communities in which Hothead was cherished:

> *Hothead Paisan* came out of an era when lesbians created our own conversations, completely independent of corporate influence. …Our stories were not reported in the non-lesbian press, our organizations were not funded, our leaders' names were not known to others. But there was so much activity that a life could be filled to the brim with performances, readings, parties, dances, relationships, affairs, revelations, demonstrations, and endless conversations. Every night, we went out, met new people, encountered new ideas in women's newspapers and books, and had revelations together as a way of life….[7]

The movement was so alive as to be constantly shifting: new women trying out new endeavors, new ways of gathering

[7] Schulman, Sarah. "We Want Revenge and We Want It Now." In *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*, by Diane DiMassa. New York Review Comics. New York Review Books, 2024: 4-5.

and of understanding ourselves. All were entirely invisible to the marketplace and to corporate media.

Imagine!

entirely invisible to the marketplace and to corporate media

had revelations together as a way of life

a life could be filled to the brim with performances, readings, parties, dances, relationships, affairs, revelations, demonstrations, and endless conversations

We do not have to settle for the eviscerated, corporatized, institutionalized, spreadsheeted idea of academia that we have been given.

Imagine scholarship as a community of care. Imagine scholarship as a dance party associated with an underground press.

Imagine learning and teaching as a fugitive activity. And find the fun in that.

Access

I don't actually care much about openness — I care about access. That seems to be at odds with some acolytes of OA who sometimes seem to forget there's a second word in the phrase *Open Access*.

For whom are we providing access? How?

Here, I think of Universal Design, particularly Universal Design for Learning. As with OA, there's plenty of good scholarship exploring UDL, but, as Allyson Laird wrote in a 2024 master's thesis at Penn State, "Despite 'growing up' together

and with very similar goals, these movements have yet to formally unite, and instead are often seen as separate and distinct."[8]

More OA practitioners need to read work such as two articles from the *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication*: "The Limits of Inclusion in Open Access: Accessible Access, Universal Design, and Open Educational Resources" by Matthew Weirick Johnson and Salma Abumeeiz and "Access for Whom? An Examination of Public-Facing Accessibility Practices in Library Accessibility Alliance Members' Open Access Institutional Repositories" by Carli Spina, Colleen Lougen, and Jennifer Keller Jensen.[9]

OA generally relies on PDFs, and though it is possible to create accessible PDFs, having a variety of formats is always better, for various reasons. Project Gutenberg is a good model. (The Internet Archive would be a good model if they didn't just automatically generate their EPUB, txt, etc. files from PDFs, making PDF the only actually functional format.) Multiplicity is strength.

Every OA publisher should be familiar with the DAISY Consortium and their standards.[10] At the very least, article publishers should offer both PDF and HTML and book publishers should offer both PDF and EPUB (EPUB 3 is "born accessible"). Anything less is to privilege *open* over *access*.

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[8] Laird, Allyson. "Accessibility as a Crucial Social Justice Component of Open Access for Library Publishers - Blacklight." MA thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 2024: 1. https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/catalog/31665ams1130.

[9] Johnson, Matthew Weirick, and Salma Abumeeiz. "The Limits of Inclusion in Open Access: Accessible Access, Universal Design, and Open Educational Resources." *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication* 11, no. 1 (2023). https://doi.org/10.31274/jlsc.14399.
Spina, Carli, Colleen Lougen, and Jennifer Keller Jensen. "Access for Whom? An Examination of Public-Facing Accessibility Practices in Library Accessibility Alliance Members' Open Access Institutional Repositories." *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication* 12, no. 2 (2025). https://doi.org/10.31274/jlsc.18208.

[10] Available at https://daisy.org/activities/standards

Samuel Moore wonders how, in a true academic commons, "the outputs may be shared with all" — but many of the practices of OA make it difficult for those outputs to be shared with people who are not conventionally abled.

It's time to widen our circle of solidarity.

The OA Problem of AI Is Not a Problem of OA or AI

Open Access has an AI problem. Maybe a few, but the biggest one is the problem of generative AI being trained on open materials that the creator does not want to have used for training AI. Theoretically, anything with a Creative Commons Noncommercial license should be untouched by any big AI, since the big AI companies are commercial businesses. Of course, the big AI companies are utterly predatory, with a huge sense of entitlement, and they have gobbled up everything they could find, regardless of any sort of copyright. This is all being litigated at the moment, but the way early court cases have gone, it's likely that in the US at least, AI companies will be allowed to train on most materials and this will be considered fair use. Given the mendacity and cravenness of the current US Supreme Court majority, it is unlikely that any meaningful legal guardrails for AI will last.

(Still, I do wish Creative Commons would come up with a simple no-AI license. I know all the AI companies would ignore it, but at least it would allow those of us who want nothing to do with AI to be able to signal our disapproval.)

This is not, though, an OA problem. Whether you publish OA or not, your work is likely to be fair game for AI. In fact, with so many of the big academic publishers going head-over-heels toward AI tools, publishing closed access is equally likely — maybe even more likely — to turn your work into grist for AI swill.

So the problem is not OA. But ultimately the problem is also not AI.

I still believe there is no ethical use of AI. That does not, though, mean there couldn't be an ethical use in the future. The problem is not AI as a concept. The problem is the world into which AI has been born.

There are numerous downsides to AI, but the ones I tend to mention are that it is a massive hog of resources, it was trained on countless writers' and artists' work without even the slightest attempt to ask permission to use that work, and it makes some of the worst people in the world even wealthier and more powerful than they already are. Those are all solvable problems, but we have not organized the world in such a way as to make them likely to be solved in our lifetimes.

We could halt most of the environmental and resource problems by requiring that all data centers draw from sustainable, renewable sources and that they meet strict guidelines for, for instance, groundwater use and pollution. This would prevent some growth and also spur those innovative, entrepreneurial wizards (as they style themselves) to come up with solutions to resource challenges. We could pay writers and artists to use their work. We could require AI companies to make significant donations to nonprofit arts organizations — at least 10% of their annual budget, say. Or, even better, we could structure our economy in such a way that writers and artists could live more freely, less beholden to whatever scraps of royalties they can get — with, for starters, a basic income plan like the one in Ireland.[11]

Abolish capitalism and a lot of the problems with AI go away. Ban billionaires. You can get up to $999,999,999 in wealth and then congratulations! You've won capitalism! Everything else goes back into the society that allowed you to

[11] See "Ireland Offers $1,500 Monthly Basic Income for Artists to Support Innovation and Creativity" by Emma Taggart, My Modern Met, 20 October 2025. https://mymodernmet.com/ireland-basic-income-arts.

become so rich and powerful. Start with something small like the Massachusetts wealth tax (4% fee on incomes above $1 million) and go from there until the obscene wealth inequality in this country is significantly lessened. Rebuild the social safety net. Nationalize and de-monetize healthcare. Reinvigorate the public good.

These things are all possible and would make living in the US vastly more pleasant and happy, but with so much money in politics and with the Supreme Court captured for a generation by rightwing zealots, there is no political path forward that does not require massive changes to current systems. So right now many of the methods by which AI could be made ethical are unavailable. But, again, this is not the fault of AI as a concept or a possibility. It is the reality of tech and politics in the current environment of American death-drive hypercapitalism.

And as Justin Raden points out in a recent piece for Defector, there are specific problems of AI (and capitalism) within the world of education and scholarship — but they are also not inherent to AI, they are inherent to the neoliberalization of academia, the cowering of universities under the boot of big business:

> The increasing vocationalization of the university … also signals another shift, away from the already insidious product-oriented education model that has long defined the corporatized university, and toward a subscription-based education, modelled on the software-as-a-service scheme that predominates today's tech. This has played out at all levels of the university.[12]

[12] "Higher Ed's Rush to Adopt AI Is About So Much More than AI" by Justin Raden, *Defector*, 23 October 2025. https://defector.com/higher-eds-rush-to-adopt-ai-is-about-so-much-more-than-ai

Faculty autonomy has been shattered, shared governance whittled away, tenure made almost meaningless, the idea of the public good tossed into a dumpster like a dead cat in an alley. These are not problems of AI, but they are problems AI companies feast on and exacerbate.

Open Access Against Fascism

And now in the United States we live in fascism. (Maybe a more common experience in our history than we tend to think.) The triumph of neoliberalism has been terrible for knowledge and learning, but now that disaster is compounded by the triumph of rightwing authoritarianism and by the particular ways technocapitalism is playing out. Fun times!

Open Access can stand against this — if we remember our values and remember that OA is a tool and a strategic component, not, itself, an end.

One of the reasons I like OA is that it makes it more difficult for work to disappear at the whim of an authoritarian power. Open redundancy is powerful. It's the principle of LOCKSS: Lots Of Copies Keep Stuff Safe.[13] My book *About That Life* is the book of mine least likely to disappear from the world because it's mirrored all over the place — publisher punctum books provides a PDF, I provide various formats on my own site, it's in JSTOR and the Internet Archive and many other places, their servers scattered all over the world. Short of a catastrophic event wiping out the internet and/or electricity, the book is available (and if we get to a catastrophic wipe-out event, we're going to have far bigger worries than whether we can access particular books).

[13] https://www.lockss.org

Open Access works against the current environment in which "the truth is paywalled but the lies are free".[14] There is a social value to having good, vetted, edited, reviewed information freely available. That's long been a basic principle of OA, but in an age of active disinformation campaigns and AI slop, it's even more important. When Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. is in charge of a country's health information, it is truly a matter of life and death to get reliable information out there for people.

With the current administration's crackdown on universities creating conditions worse than during the post-WWII Red Scare, knowledge is being locked away, research hollowed out, teaching and learning impoverished.[15] Open Access is anathema to the authoritarians creating the current crisis because even the most capitalized and compromised OA stands in contradiction to authoritarian control. OA with an ethics behind it can be a tool for antifascist practice.

Open Thinking and Analog Access

Above, I discussed my university library's devasting budget cuts. To their credit, our librarians have preserved as much of the print book budget as best they can. Unlike electronic resources, we actually own the books, don't have to pay for them over and over again, and are not going to lose them

[14] "The Truth Is Paywalled But The Lies Are Free: The political economy of bullshit" by Nathan J. Robinson, *Current Affairs*, 2 August 2020. https://www.currentaffairs.org/news/2020/08/the-truth-is-paywalled-but-the-lies-are-free

[15] Ellen Shrecker, a preeminent historian of the Red Scare and author of *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (Oxford, 1986), is among those who have said that academia under the second Trump administration is experiencing something worse than in the 1950s. See her article "Worse Than McCarthyism: Universities in the Age of Trump" in *The Nation*, 3 April 2025: https://www.thenation.com/article/society/mccarthyism-universities-trump-attacks.

when a contract ends. They are a good investment. As Matt Seybold is fond of saying, print is a rent strike.[16]

Technocapitalism loves rentier capitalism. Companies like Microsoft no longer sell applications so much as they sell licenses. This is why I primarily use LibreOffice and give them money, but I'm still trapped in a huge number of more closed applications for my job, applications which the University System of New Hampshire rents for millions and millions of dollars every year. I'm inspired by groups like punctum books that publicize the tools they use and prioritize Open Source and Open Access apps.[17] There are good alternatives to many tools out there, but for the sake of both use and development, they need to be known.

Digital Open Access is of course vitally important and the primary focus of OA activism, but I strive for an idea of **open access as an ethos**, one that does not rely on the digital world or even on electronic tools.

We must not fall into fetishizing high tech. If we've learned anything from the data center debacles of AI, we should have learned that while AI has massively accelerated the problems, the energy and resource challenges we face are inherent to our digitized lives. Those of us who own smartphones and computers were already complicit with slave labor and toxic pollution.[18]

We need more Luddites.

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[16] One of the places where Matt Seybold has explained this idea is his American Vandal podcast, season 11, episode 15, "Newspapers Worse Than Dead (But Print Is a Rent Strike)", 4 April 2025. https://marktwainstudies.com/americanvandal/a-tale-of-today/newspapers/

[17] punctum lists and describes the tools they use on their website here: https://punctumbooks.com/about/open-source-tools/

[18] An accessible introduction to some of the labor and pollution problems of high tech lives is available in Siddarth Kara's Pulitzer-nominated book *Cobalt Red: How the Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives* (St. Martin's, 2023). Also well worth reading is *Extraction: The Frontiers of Green Capitalism* by Thea Riofrancos (W.W. Norton, 2025).

An open access ethos is an ethos of the public good. Public libraries are a perfect example, one of the few remaining institutions in the US where the idea of the public good is still fully visible. No wonder dictators work hard to censor and control libraries — and why librarians end up so often on the front lines of battles against authoritarians.

Ideas of open access and the public good are central to any consideration of Poor Queer Studies or other marginalized approaches. Work hidden behind walls, whether ivy-covered gates or digital paywalls, is not work that is accessible to the oppressed and marginalized, nor is it work that can ultimately be anything other than extractive and exploitative — because if it draws on the work of the oppressed and marginalized, it is expropriating that work, moving it from a public space into a gated community.

This is why I keep coming back to Danica Savonick's important book *Open Admissions*, which reminds us that higher education can be different from what it currently is. Savonick writes in the introduction to *Open Admissions* that:

> the era's debates surrounding educational access lit a fire in the imaginations of both professors and students. There, in their classrooms-turned-canvases, they questioned prevailing assumptions about learning: that teachers should determine what is taught, that students are the passive recipients of wisdom, that intellectual work should be painful, torturous, and disciplinary. If redesigned to serve the will of the people, what could learning look like? What might it become? And if an institution as historically exclusive as universities could be democratized, what other hierarchies might be toppled?[19]

This is the real vision of open access, the greatest vision.

[19] Savonick, *Open Admissions* (Duke, 2024), 9.

But we must also not let our thoughts be anchored to institutions. That was one of my points in "On Not Knowing Professors" and why I keep feeling the need to quote Harney & Moten's Undercommons, even as I grumble at the opacity of a lot of its language and thought. The basic idea is essential for our era. When the institution of the university is so beholden to capital and its ideologies, when administrators are simply middle managers in service to corruption, then, yes, "THE ONLY POSSIBLE RELATIONSHIP TO THE UNIVERSITY TODAY IS A CRIMINAL ONE."

Alternatives are possible, but we must recognize that to be a scholar committed to anything other than the growth of capital is to be a fugitive in this world. Look to the work of Francisco Ferrer and the Modern School movement in the early 20th century; to A.S. Neill, Paul Goodman, Ivan Illich and other radicals in the middle of the 20th century; to teach-ins; to the Open Admissions movement; to Occupy Wall Street; to the many historians and critics of neoliberalism's destruction of education; to the undercommoners and the decolonizers. Read the publications of the Aydelotte Foundation at Swarthmore College; look at Joss Winn's work on cooperative universities (josswinn.org); search around in books from publishers like Haymarket, Verso, AK Press, Pluto Press, PM Press; to the Marxism and Education book series from Palgrave MacMillan (shame on them for not making it OA — nothing says "Marxist" like a $160 paperback!) — and so much more! We do not lack for history, ideas, or vision.

As Sarah Schulman reminds us in her introduction to *Hothead Paisan*, and as so many activists, historians, and scholars have show us, marginalized groups know how to work outside of institutions in ways that support community and ultimately can affect institutions in positive ways, even if liberatory topics are expressly forbidden (as for a lot of Gender Studies, Queer Studies, and Black Studies in places like Florida

today). As Jarvis R. Givens's work reminds us, *fugitive pedagogy* has historically been a quite literal description.[20]

Remember what a Mountain Goat once sang:

> God bless all petty thieves
> With tins of oysters up their sleeves
> Feast when you can
> And dream when there's nothing to feast on[21]

There's not much left to feast on in institutional higher education today. But we can keep dreaming.

Openly Onward

I am still thinking about tools and behaviors for access in this moment, including analog open access. Here are a few (incomplete) (inadequate) ideas to finish up this Open Access Week:

Normalize resource sharing. I take this phrase from a zine from Late Night Copies Press, the title of which itself is useful to us: *Own the Means of Production and Share It*. ("Who owns our knowledge?" OA Week asks. We do — and we share.) Create a commons and support a community.

Support public libraries. They own books and other resources available for sharing. Libraries are based on the idea of the public good, on access for all. Even in the clutches of rentier capitalism, they can mitigate the detriments and increase the affordances — interlibrary loan, for instance, is something of a miracle.

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[20] *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* by Jarvis R. Givens. Harvard University Press, 2023.

[21] "Steal Smoked Fish" by The Mountain Goats from the Japanese edition of the album *Transcendental Youth* (2012). More information at https://themountaingoats.fandom.com/wiki/Steal_Smoked_Fish

Commit to reading and publishing openly. People often ask, "Why publish Open Access?" when the better question is: "Why *not* publish Open Access?" There may be valid reasons. I've done it — I do not regret my closed-access articles in *Woolf Studies Annual* or *The LGBTQ+ Comics Studies Reader* or *Teaching Modernist Women's Writing in English* (the latter of which, thanks to a good contract from the MLA, I was allowed to make more-or-less OA after a period of exclusivity). All of that was done pre-tenure and helped me to both get a job and get a certain amount of job security. Those publications continue to give me a whiff of legitimacy in spaces where I might not otherwise be taken seriously because my PhD is not from a particularly prestigious institution and I work at an underfunded regional public college most people have never heard of. These days, though, if I don't publish Open Access I do so knowing it is a deliberate choice — for instance, I was invited to contribute a chapter to the upcoming *Routledge Companion to Virginia Woolf* and in that chapter I discuss OA and even name exactly the silly price Routledge wanted to charge for the chapter to be made OA (which I refused). Now and then it's good to go into gated communities for the purpose of denouncing gated communities to the residents therein. Mostly, though, it's best to prioritize publishing openly, even if that means turning down opportunities, as I have done multiple times now. The cost, whether financial or philosophical, is just not worth it.

Prioritize access over openness. Paradoxically, sometimes access is best served via some mechanism of gatekeeping. This is especially true for marginalized communities. I may be queer, but I'm also a middleclass cisgender white guy — which means I have lots of access to lots of things and I do not need or deserve access to everything. This is why I emphasize the value of *regeneration*. It may be impossible to grow and regenerate if you are not within protective walls. (Back in

2018, I asked of public scholarship, "How Public? Why Public?" Those questions still seem vital to me today, and might be supplemented with "How Open? Why Open?") Sometimes we have to protect a commons. Sometimes we need to create samizdat literature rather than billboards. If Sauron's fiery eye is looking for you, it's better to be a hobbit than a giant. *Access* can be appropriate rather than universal. It may sometimes be most useful, equitable, and regenerative if it is limited.

From Open Access to Mutual Aid. In a 2009 interview, David Graeber noted that

> Pretty much every great worthwhile achievement in human history, every discovery or accomplishment that's improved our lives, has been based on cooperation and mutual aid; even now, most of us spend more of our money on our friends and families than on ourselves; while likely as not there will always be competitive people in the world, there's no reason why society has to be based on encouraging such behavior, let alone making people compete over the basic necessities of life. That only serves the interests of people in power, who want us to live in fear of one another. That's why anarchists call for a society based not only on free association but mutual aid.[22]

In our society, and therefore in our institutions of learning, we need more emphasis on mutual aid. Solidarity, not charity. Generosity, not competition. Sharing, not hoarding. Commons, not enclosures. Open Access is a part of that, but it is far from sufficient.

[22] "Are You An Anarchist? The Answer May Surprise You!" available at https://davidgraeber.org/articles/are-you-an-anarchist-the-answer-maysurprise-you.

We need openness, but we need an openness that prioritizes ethics and values, openness that doesn't cherish itself more than it cherishes access, fairness, mutuality.

I'm sure there are more ideas to explore, but International Open Access Week is coming to an end and everything I've written here is already much longer and messier than I originally intended.

Ours is an open conversation, though, not a closed one, and so it will continue.

—October 2025

Bibliography and Further Reading

Some of the items below are referenced in the text, many are not; items primarily bearing on individual chapters are referenced in the footnotes to those chapters rather than here, where my goal is to show an overall sense of the network of ideas informing this book as a whole. Thus, items not referenced in the text are here because they either contributed to my thinking generally (sometimes in opposition to them!) or, most often, because I consider them to be useful resources for further inquiry and study.

Many of the items here could be filed under multiple categories. I have put them into the categories that seemed most relevant for my own purposes, which occasionally are not the primary purposes of the items themselves.

Despite the length of this bibliography, it is not remotely comprehensive for any of its topics. It seeks to provide you with some good, big breadcrumbs to begin journeying in almost infinite possible directions.

The categories are:

- Grading and Ungrading
- Interdisciplinary Studies
- Open Access and Open Education
- Pandemic Years
- Politics and Political Economy
- Praxis and Pedagogy
- Schools and Education
- Technology

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Publication History

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- How Public? Why Public? (July 2018)
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- Known, Needed, Cared For (September 2018)
- Pass No Pass (December 2018)
- *Why They Can't Write* by John Warner (January 2019)
- What Price Academic Books? (February 2019)
- Cruelty-Free Syllabi (February 2019)
- Lessons for Higher Ed from the Survival of Independent Bookstores (March 2019)
- Of Margins, Refuge, and Survival (April 2019)
- Assignment: Low Tech Research (May 2019)
- Thinking About Generous Thinking (July 2019)
- Five Values (August 2019)
- *When Students Have Power* by Ira Schor (February 2020)
- The Value of Uselessness (May 2020)
- Show & Tell (July 2020)
- Instead of Rigor: Play and Risk (September 2020)
- The Value in the Public Good (October 2020)
- Poor. Queer. Studies. (November 2020)
- Salvage (April 2021)
- Thinking Hope Under Erasure (May 2021)
- The Grindr Model of Higher Education (June 2021)

- Extending the Mind (September 2021)
- The Good, the Bad, and the Interdisciplinary (October 2021)
- Poor Queer Studies for a Society of Outsiders (January 2022)
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- Generous Thinking Now (April 2022)
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- Disciplined Making (March 2023)
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About the Author

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His books include *Modernist Crisis and the Pedagogy of Form: Woolf, Delany, and Coetzee at the Limits of Fiction* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), *About That Life: Barry Lopez and the Art of Community* (punctum books, 2023), *Asterisks: Essays* (punctum books, 2026), *Blood: Stories* (Black Lawrence Press, 2016), *The Last Vanishing Man and Other Stories* (Third Man Books, 2023), and the queer horror novella *Changes in the Land* (Lethe Press, 2024). He edited *Moon Songs: The Selected Stories of Carol Emshwiller* (Third Man Books, 2025), was the series editor for *Best American Fantasy* (Prime Books & Underland Press 2007-2010), and co-edited the occasional online magazine *The Revelator* with Eric Schaller.

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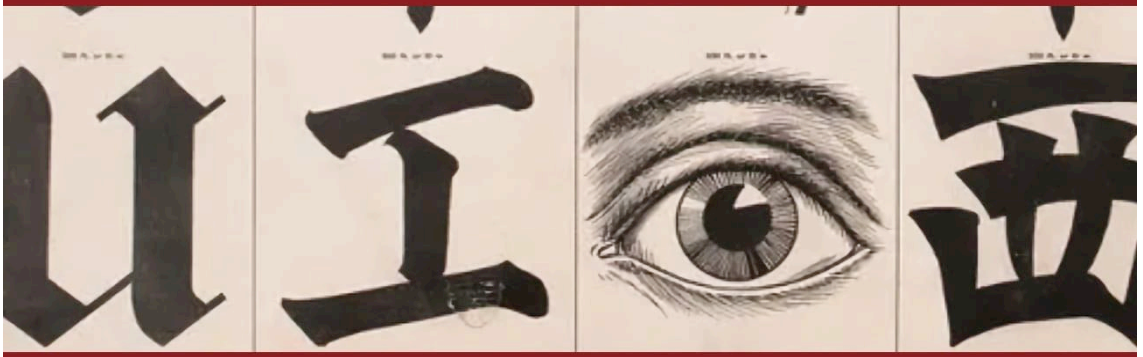
solidarity
cooperation
coalition
refuge
regeneration



In 2018, **Matthew Cheney** took a phrase from a poem by Emily Dickinson and named his new website ***Finite Eyes***. There, he would chronicle his experience as a professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at a regional state university in New Hampshire, a state averse to financing education. Soon, he would contend with the effects of the COVID pandemic on his university, colleagues, and students, and he would have a front-row seat for the defunding and devaluing of higher education in America.

His experiences led him to prioritize ideas of **access** (open access, universal access) and five values: **solidarity**, **cooperation**, **coalition**, **refuge**, and **regeneration**.

The essays in this book explore those ideas and values, chronicling a specific time in the history of learning and teaching while seeking ideas with which to build **a new, and better, future**.